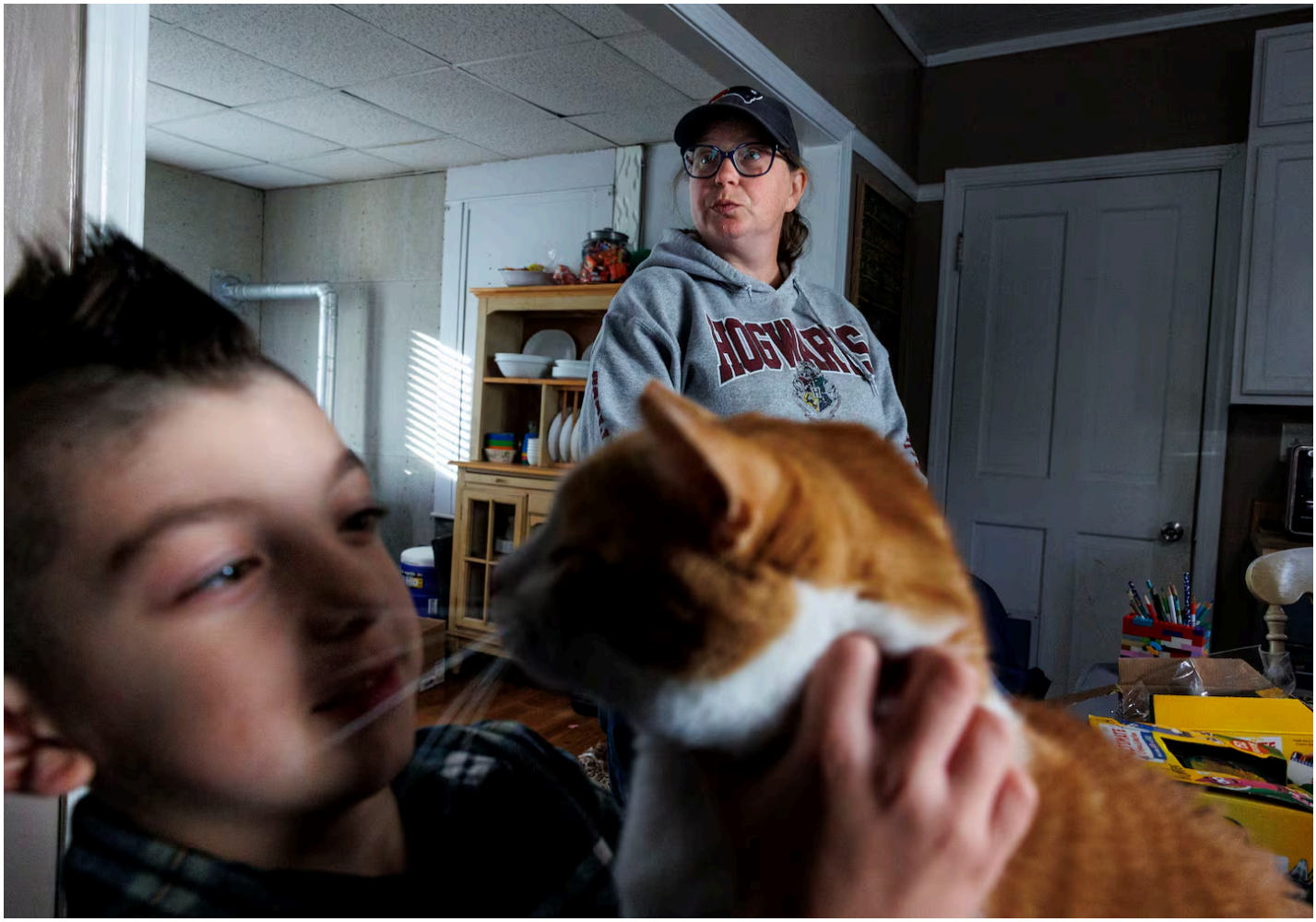
For one family in New Bedford, the government shutdown's effects pile up

By Sadaf Tokhi Globe Correspondent, Updated November 11, 2025, 1:28 p.m.



Hunter Doyon gave Nemo, one of the Doyon family cats, neck scratches while his mother, Donna, prepared to drop her sons off at school on a recent Friday in New Bedford. BEN PENNINGTON/FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

EW BEDFORD — Donna Doyon calls everyone "Mama."

That greeting is used throughout the day — at her son Hunter's elementary school, where she thanks Mr. Ian, the crossing guard, for keeping kids safe; at PACE Head Start a few blocks away, where she drops off her younger son, Archer, and takes a few extra minutes to spend time with the center's therapy dog, Sam; even in the food pantry line, where she compliments a man's Patriots jacket.

When she realizes she's forgotten her pantry card, a worker waves her in anyway.

"You're easy to remember," the woman tells her with a smile.

Everywhere she goes, Donna greets people like old friends.

But as she checks in on others, the federal shutdown is quietly fraying the supports that keep her own family steady. The record 42-day government closure could be coming to an end soon, but the funding freeze continues to undermine the Doyon family and millions more who depend on federal safety net programs.

The Doyons have been living on a single income since Donna, who had worked as a grocery store cashier, injured her leg nearly a year ago. Her husband, Gerry, drives trucks full time but said he's considering a second job to keep up with bills while Donna waits for medical clearance to return to work.

Programs like Head Start, the food pantry, and assistance with heating bills have helped the family of four stay steady during that time, he said, keeping their youngest son Archer in school, food on the table, and the heat on.

Now Archer's Head Start classroom is surviving on emergency state funds. The heating assistance program they rely on every winter has been frozen. And the SNAP food stamp benefits they hoped to finally qualify for remain delayed amid legal and funding turmoil. (On Tuesday, the US Supreme Court extended an order blocking full SNAP payments through Thursday.)



Donna Doyon high-fived her son, Archer, while they worked on completing a jigsaw puzzle together before his school day in New Bedford. BEN PENNINGTON/FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE



Gerry Doyon hugs his sons Hunter (left) and Archer outside the family home before he departed for work. BEN PENNINGTON/FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Archer is one of roughly 400 children enrolled in PACE Head Start in New Bedford — a federally funded preschool program now caught in the government shutdown's uncertainty.

Head Start has been the first place Archer has ever felt fully comfortable. The 4-year-old, who has a blonde almost-buzz cut and sports pink glasses, once struggled to be around other kids. Now he skips down the hallway to his class, where teachers, other parents, and students greet him by name.

“He’s learning to have relationships,” Donna said. “He’s thriving there.”

Archer has sensory processing disorder, and at Head Start the staff have helped him ease the discomfort that once made him use five napkins to eat mac and cheese, encouraging him instead to describe food textures as “crunchy” or “squishy” instead of “yummy” and “yucky” and explore at his own pace.

The program’s teachers have become “like family,” Donna said, and the support has extended beyond the classroom, connecting the family to the food pantry and fuel assistance.

Donna’s now on the parent committee and training to become a substitute teacher herself.

But PACE’s Head Start future is fragile. The center is among six Massachusetts programs whose federal grants were supposed to renew on Nov. 1 but remain frozen amid the shutdown. Temporary state dollars are keeping classrooms open.

Donna Doyon helped her son Archer take off his hoodie before he was dropped off at PACE Head Start preschool. BEN PENNINGTON/FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Donna Doyon embraced her son, Hunter, before he went to school in New Bedford. BEN PENNINGTON/FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

The food pantry has become a routine stop for Donna after she drops Archer off at Head Start next door. She is allowed to come once a week.

When she first started coming to the PACE food pantry, Donna says, she almost didn’t walk through the door. “My family never had to do that,” she said later. “I felt like an imposter.”

Even after injuring her leg and needing a full brace, Donna kept waiting in the regular line, convinced she didn't qualify for the early-entry spot reserved for people with mobility devices. "It's temporary," she told herself. The volunteers waved her ahead anyway.

Some days at the pantry are better than others. "It's looking a bit bare [this week]," she said. Sometimes there is meat and fresh produce from grocery store donations or frozen Panera soup, Donna said. Other days, it's mostly canned goods and pasta.

On a visit last week, tensions were running high, as some were frustrated with the selections and volunteers were struggling to keep people going through the lines in an orderly fashion. Even though Donna had arrived early and was at the beginning of the line, some folks skipped ahead.

"They probably need it more, I will get what I need."

Donna said she has noticed more people turn up each week during the government shutdown and when SNAP benefits were halted this month.

Donna Doyon waited in line for her turn to enter the PACE Community Food Center. BEN PENNINGTON/FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Donna Doyon drove her sons Hunter and Archer to school. BEN PENNINGTON/FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Donna's family has tried to qualify for SNAP twice. The first time, she and her husband earned just over the income limit. After her injury, she was ready to reapply, but the government had shut down. Now she's waiting for clarity on whether she can apply or if the process is on hold.

"I should probably put that on the chalkboard," she said, referring to her to-do list displayed in her kitchen.

She insists visiting the pantry is only temporary. "I'm stubborn," she said. "I don't want to be doing this forever." Still, until her doctor clears her to go back to work, she comes every week. "Is it enough for a week for a family of four? No," she said. "But it makes a huge difference."

The family still shops for groceries but looks for deals wherever they can find them — meat scraps from the deli for Gerry's lunches, cheese from Walmart because it's cheaper there, and bulk essentials like toilet paper at BJ's. Most of it goes on the credit card for now.

That balance grew after the oil gauge on the Doyons' decades-old furnace broke. By the time they noticed and called for a refill, the tank was nearly empty.

Normally, the family could request an emergency delivery through the state's Home Energy Assistance Program, or HEAP, which is funded by the federal government.

They've done it before. But this time, a paperwork issue meant their application couldn't be processed in time and they had no choice but to charge the nearly $400 delivery to their credit card.

This year marks the Doyons' fourth winter receiving fuel assistance. In past years, the program helped them replace their rusted oil tank, insulate their home, and swap out older appliances for energy-efficient ones.

Donna Doyon browsed through the PACE Community Food Center while being guided by a pantry volunteer. BEN PENNINGTON/FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

"It takes some burden off us," Gerry said, "so we can put that money toward other bills. But we're still in debt."

For now, they're paying off the emergency refill, hoping it lasts until their next delivery through HEAP, and until the shutdown ends. "You do what you have to," Donna said.

Donna doesn't follow the news much anymore. It's better for her mental health, she said. So she hadn't known about the shutdown until an administrator at her son's Head Start program asked if she'd be willing to speak about her experience with a reporter.

That's when she realized how far the shutdown's reach had crept into her own life and how much she and so many others depended on the programs now hanging in limbo.

"It's not about them getting their way," she said of Congress. "They're hurting children and families. People who voted for them. I just hope they figure it out soon. There'd be a community shutdown if this keeps going."

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