

A hard year for federal workers offers a real-time lesson in resilience

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Imagine going from having a book club with your co-workers to seeing them only on a Signal chat where every member has to be vetted – and the main conversation topic is when you might lose your job.

That's what it was like for workers at one federal agency earlier this year.

"I'd never seen anything like the sort of organization that happened during the RIFs (layoffs, or reductions in force) in supporting each other with news, information and job resources," said Anthony, a federal worker who'd been with the agency for almost a decade before his position was eliminated. He asked that his real name and other identifying details not be published, out of fear of retaliation.

Anthony's not alone. So far in 2025, tens of thousands of federal workers have lost their jobs. And during the shutdown, approximately 600,000 were threatened with layoffs.

But something else happened alongside the cuts: Federal workers began building support networks online – connecting with colleagues inside their agencies and with strangers outside them.

I'm an anthropologist, which means I study human nature and human diversity, and I'm an expert in how people cooperate to manage risk. Watching federal workers use social media to provide mutual support offered a rare real-time view of the process. To deepen my understanding, I interviewed several federal workers who work in different parts of government.

They told me that in the past, federal workers haven't always interacted with their co-workers outside of work, much less connected across federal agencies. But thanks to online platforms, that's changing.

As they've faced RIFs, operational changes from the Department of Government Efficiency (or DOGE) and the longest government shutdown in history, current and former federal workers have come together in online spaces to support one another. The result is a vivid example of how people create resilient networks, often spanning group boundaries and distance, in response to uncertainty and threats.

Reaching out across groups and across distance

In 2025, federal workers built social networks like the ones we study in my lab. When experiencing widespread shocks – things such as droughts or mass job loss – humans past and present have relied on relationships that stretch beyond the individuals affected. Often that means getting support from people at a distance, and it can also mean reaching out across groups.

When just a few people reach across groups, social scientists call these connectors “brokers.” They often move information across groups. As a user of LinkedIn and Bluesky, I have observed that federal workers in positions of power, or who have been recently RIFed and thus have less to lose, are often brokers, because with visibility comes risk of retribution. These brokers share information on where to find unemployment benefits or how to sign petitions calling for scientific independence.

There are even more connections spanning distance and agencies when workers can remain anonymous. Platforms such as Reddit and Bluesky are places where workers feel safer to speak freely. There, workers can share information and also frustration, little wins, and some laughs.

What’s more, as my lab has shown, these long-distance relationships can also bolster collective action – working toward a shared goal, often across space and across groups, such as federal agencies.

For example, Julia Simon – who agreed to let me use her name but asked that other identifying details be withheld – has a friend who works at the same federal agency as her but lives in a different part of the country. This year, her friend suggested that Julia join the Federal Unionists Network. Members from across agencies provide mutual support and work together toward change in their union – the American Federation of Government Employees – and beyond.

“I’ve felt that within my own local and district I’ve been seen as too radical so my ideas tend to get shot down or ignored,” Simon told me in an interview. “But finding a group of other AFGE activists who have similar views and goals has been validating.”

Hunkering down among trusted others

That said, when people fear surveillance and possible retaliation, they may not reach out to long-distance connections. Instead, networks often shift toward tight-knit clusters, reducing risk of exposure and increasing trust.

In 2025, many federal workers leaned into private Signal chats with their co-workers. Users are vetted before they can join Signal chats to help workers feel safer in these spaces.

When workers were faced with RIFs, a visit from DOGE or the government shutdown, Signal chat activity would increase, workers told me.

“The content was largely ‘I heard from our division director that the RIF notices will go out Friday’ or ‘If you’re comfortable with it, here’s a Zoom workshop on how to manage your emotions during layoffs,’” Anthony said. At their peak, he told me, these chats had hundreds of participants.

Mason, furloughed from a different agency during the shutdown, gave another example. “Today, there are about a dozen messages among federal employees who are trying to provide information and support to each other about applying for unemployment benefits,” he said in an interview.

Though these Signal groups are tight-knit, long-distance relationships still are a source of information – bringing news from spouses and friends at other agencies and content from Reddit, LinkedIn and Bluesky.

For some workers, the most important benefit of these Signal chats is the sense of community they provide.

“These group chats and communities sprung up because we were being terrorized and we only had each other for support,” Anthony said. “I remember seeing some wild statistic early on that said a lot of folks support DOGE’s mission – from our side, it was like, ‘Guess we’re on our own.’ I can’t tell you how many times I heard, ‘Nobody is coming to save us’ – so that’s why we needed these groups.”

Learning from federal workers’ experiences

These stories from federal workers are a reminder of how hundreds of thousands of Americans working for the public may be experiencing uncertainty, fear, loss and isolation this year.

They also offer important lessons on how to build the resilient networks that sustain us as people.

First, if you feel you cannot trust others, trust can emerge in highly connected clusters that can pool information and take action. As Anthony highlighted, forming these clusters can provide individuals with a sense of community.

Second, connections spanning groups and distance open doors for transmitting information and, as Julia experienced, for engaging in collective action. Long-distance relationships can also help you access things that can be hard to find, such as information about what’s next, support with food or loans, and even new job opportunities.

These resilient networks are a reminder that online platforms have a silver lining. Many news stories focus on how social media use can negatively affect people's mental health or social relationships. What federal workers highlight, however, is that the effect of online platforms on your well-being can depend on how you use them.

LinkedIn, Reddit, Signal and other platforms can allow you to create and sustain networks that might be impossible to have in person, either because trust is low or simply because you're busy. Online platforms allow people to build tight-knit clusters or to have more long-distance relationships at greater distances than ever before.

So whether you're looking for like-minded others, people who can help you face something you've never faced before, or a sense of community when you've lost so much, online platforms remain an important tool to help us find each other.

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