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Government shutdown puts squeeze on Republican moderates

A group of such lawmakers from New Jersey and Pennsylvania says it's time to drop the party's fight against President Obama's healthcare law.

By Joseph Tanfani

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NEW HANOVER TOWNSHIP, N.J. — Kenn Challenger, a Republican, is not thrilled with Obamacare.

But this week, he's a lot more worried about how he's going to pay the mortgage and feed his three children. The government shutdown has temporarily cost him his job as a civilian aircraft mechanic at a nearby military base.

"I talked to the bank, and they said the best they'd do would be to waive the late fee," said Challenger, 33, standing underneath the American flag on his front step. "There's nothing I can do about it now."

This pocket of small-town New Jersey, mostly Republican and deeply dependent on nearby Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst, is filled with military retirees and now, with the shutdown, thousands of angry, idled workers like Challenger.

That is putting a tough political squeeze on Jon Runyan, the former NFL tackle who represents this town in Congress, and a handful of other Republican lawmakers from the Philadelphia region — part of a small and dwindling band of GOP moderates.

"Jon is sort of torn between party loyalty and what's good for his district," said Carl Golden, a former spokesman for two Republican New Jersey governors and an analyst with the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy in Gallitzin, N.J. "I'm sure he can't be happy right now, the way this thing is going."

Runyan is one of seven House Republicans from the area who have said it's time to end the party's effort to halt the Affordable Care Act, sometimes called Obamacare, in exchange for continued funding of the government. "Enough is enough," Runyan said Tuesday after the shutdown began, adding that "shutting down the entire federal government and threatening our economy to make a political point is utterly ridiculous."

Another southern New Jersey Republican, Rep. Frank LoBiondo, also said he could support a so-called clean resolution to fund the government tied to President Obama's healthcare law.

The other five Republican lawmakers are from Pennsylvania — Lou Barletta, Charlie Dent, Michael G. Fitzpatrick, Jim Gerlach and Pat Meehan. They have mostly stuck with their party in votes to

halt spending for the healthcare law, and so far leadership hasn't called a floor vote on a bill that just funds the government.

Dent, who voted with leadership twice before breaking ranks on a vote Monday, has said it's time to move on.

"We're all tired of brinkmanship and the showmanship and all the drama and the theatrics, and we want to get on with the business of governing," Dent said Thursday at a news conference, flanked by the other four Pennsylvania Republicans. "We have to do better."

If the rank-and-file does rebel, it would not be surprising if it began with lawmakers from greater Philadelphia. In these districts, voters tend to be pragmatic — culturally liberal, well-educated, worried about pocketbook issues and more willing than most voters to cross party lines.

"There are people who are practical and there are people who are ideological, and these are practical conservatives," said G. Terry Madonna, a public policy professor at Franklin and Marshall College in Lancaster, Pa.

These states have Republican governors but have voted Democratic in the last six presidential elections. Republicans have hung on in these districts by staying in the political center: talking about lower taxes and less regulation, steering clear of great conservative social issues and avoiding operatic displays of partisan vitriol.

Runyan's district, where Democrats outnumber Republicans for Obama in the last election; the districts on the Pennsylvania side voted for Mitt Romney, but narrowly.

"This is a state that likes to elect moderates," said former New Jersey Gov. Tom Kean, a Republican. "Too far to the left or too far to the right, it's probably not the right state for you."

Runyan did not respond to several requests for an interview.

His district, the New Jersey 3rd, stretches like a girdle across the southern bulge of the state, from the Delaware River to the shore. It takes in post-9/11 commuter towns and produce farms, the rural Pinelands, retirement communities and shore towns such as Sea Bright that were hammered by Superstorm Sandy.

In this state of divided fan loyalties, this is mostly Philadelphia Eagles territory. Runyan parlayed nine seasons with the team to a seat in Congress, when he narrowly unseated a Democrat in the 2010 election.

It's a district that Democrats believe can be pulled back, and the day after the shutdown voters here got a robocall paid for by the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee: "While you were sleeping, Congressman Jon Runyan shut down the government. You heard that right. But even worse, Congressman Runyan is still getting paid and he's not listening to our frustration."

At the same time, Runyan's call to end the shutdown drew fire from some conservatives in the district.

"Trademark Runyan," said Bill Haney, founder of the Burlington County Tea Party. He said his group did a lot to help elect Runyan but now felt betrayed, calling the congressman "a continual disappointment" who had become more concerned with placating liberals and keeping his seat.

"There are certain times when compromise is necessary," said Haney — but not on the healthcare law.

More mainstream Republicans recoiled at the shutdown spearheaded by tea party lawmakers, including Sen. Ted Cruz (R-Texas). "We believe there is some function for government," said Glenn Paulsen, former Republican Party chairman of Burlington County. "We're not applauding."

"Do I think that the tactics of Ted Cruz and a small band of his Republican colleagues hurt the Republican brand in the Northeast? Absolutely," Paulsen said.

In Runyan's hometown of Mount Laurel, Bill Snyder, 89, shook his head in bafflement. A retired government manager and World War II veteran of the South Pacific, Snyder grew up Republican, considers himself independent and voted for Obama although he doesn't like the healthcare law.

"These people who can't afford any insurance at all, they have to go get a job," he said.

He doesn't think that much of Runyan — "How can a football player become a congressman?" — but said he was impressed that Runyan spoke up against his party's leadership.

"Every vote that comes up is solid Republican or Democrat," he said. "When a guy like him goes up against the whole party, he voices his mind and his thoughts, that's what the government needs."