

Food stamp, cash assistance demand continues at record levels

by Bend_Weekly_News_Sources

The increase in the number of people receiving food stamps in Oregon during the past year is greater than the population of Medford; workers continue to scramble to help struggling Oregonians.

January 2009 brought the biggest increase of the recession in the demand for temporary cash assistance and food stamps in Oregon - - and the need continues at record levels, the Oregon Department of Human Resources recently reported.

The number of families receiving cash assistance through the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program increased 18.9 percent statewide since January 2008, for a total of 22,601 families. That's 3,595 more families than one year ago.

Food stamp demand increased 17 percent over January 2008, adding 77,929 more people than one year ago a number larger than the total number of people in the city of Medford (76,850). A total of 535,000 people "or 277,000 households" received the benefit in Oregon last month.

The greatest increase in TANF need was in Washington County, with 36 percent more people receiving TANF benefits than last year. The next highest increase was in Clackamas at 25.5 percent and the Salem area (Marion, Yamhill, and Polk counties) at 24.3 percent. These increases are particularly stunning when considering cash assistance is available only to families with children and only to people who have very few assets and very low income. For example, the monthly income limit is \$795 (approximately 45 percent of the federal poverty level) for a two-parent family with two kids.

"We're seeing a lot of people who have never walked through that door before," says Joe Lopez, who assists people applying for services in the DHS Beaverton branch. "They're scared. Almost all these people are homeowners in foreclosure, or people faced with eviction notices. They've already spent all their savings. It's scary to think about. Where will they go?"

Food stamp increases hit different areas of the state. For the 13th month in a row, the Bend area showed the greatest increase in the state in demand for food stamps at 27 percent over last year. The North Oregon coastal area (Tillamook, Astoria, and St. Helens) saw the second largest increases this month, 20 percent higher than January 2008. The Medford area and Clackamas County each had a 19 percent increase.

To qualify for food stamps, families must earn less than 185 percent of the federal poverty level, along with other qualifying factors. For eligibility for a family of four, the maximum amount of monthly income would be \$3,400 per month. Benefits are awarded on a sliding scale basis. For example, a family of four with no income could receive the maximum benefit of \$588 per month.

The increased demand for economic, nutritional and medical assistance is stretching the capacity of local DHS branches.

"There are frankly more people coming in than we can help in a single day," says Lynda K. Stone of the Bend District 10 Branch. "That takes a toll on workers, and it's just heartbreaking, not only because of the workload but because of seeing so many families who were once meeting their basic needs and now literally have nothing."

"I am concerned about Oregonians who are struggling in this economy and I'm concerned for our workers who are struggling to keep up with increased demand," says Erinn Kelley-Siel, Assistant Director of the Children, Adults and Families Division, which administers the cash assistance and food stamps benefits.

As Oregon unemployment continues to rise and demand for temporary economic help such as cash assistance and food stamps hits record levels, the Oregon Department of Human Services last month began calling the situation an emergency.

The division is moving staff to the hardest hit branches and adding more workers using a federal bonus award; however, workload models show that demand continues to outpace staffing levels in the branches.

"The workers at DHS who are on the front lines of the economy have responded incredibly well in trying to keep up with a steady and unrelenting growth in need in virtually all areas of Oregon," says Kelley-Siel.

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