

News

MORE S.J. RESIDENTS TURN TO FOOD BENEFITS PROGRAM

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STOCKTON - The number of people in San Joaquin County receiving food stamps keeps growing, with the percentage of those receiving the benefit growing by 17 percent for the second year in a row.

Here are the startling figures:

» From September 2008 to September 2010, the number of individuals in the program grew from 64,909 to 88,577, an increase of more than 36 percent.

» In terms of households, the increase tops 40 percent, with 24,069 households in 2008 growing to 33,779 in 2010.

» In September 2010, the benefit paid out \$12.8 million in federal funds to county households.

The upsurge mirrors a statewide increase in the use of the benefit, though the increase in San Joaquin County over the past year exceeds the state average, according to the California Association of Food Banks.

A number of factors have been pushing up the number of participants in the nutrition program, according to those who administer or watch the program in the county and state. One obvious factor is the economy, as people losing jobs seek help feeding themselves and their families.

But there have been policy and procedure changes at both the state and local level that have contributed, too.

Just how much more one factor has contributed to the rise compared with another is uncertain, said Stephanie Nishio, California Association of Food Banks director of programs. But it's good news, because it shows the program is doing what it is supposed to do, she said.

"It's responding to people's need, when there is a need," she said.

In reality, there are no stamps. They've been replaced by debit cards. And there is no food stamp program. At the federal level, it's been renamed the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. And last month, California rebranded the statewide version of the program as CalFresh to reduce any stigma attached to the old moniker and to focus more on healthy living and nutrition.

Some less-recent changes in the statewide rules have contributed to growth in the program, though hunger advocates say more can be done to make it easier for eligible people to receive nutrition help.

One change has allowed families with children to qualify for benefits, even if they have money in the bank or other assets. That means a family doesn't have to deplete all of its savings before getting food help, said officials in San Joaquin County government, which administers the local program.

The so-called asset waiver is limited to households with children, but there are proposed changes to state rules that would expand the waiver to households without children, said Lynette Norman, program manager.

Locally, advocates have pushed to make increased enrollment in the program a top issue. It is also the priority of the Hunger Task Force For San Joaquin County, which was formed four years ago and is made up of representatives from both government agencies and private charities.

"I know that as an agency, we've been doing a lot to be more accessible," but there's still room for improvement, said Joe Chelli, director of the county Human Services Agency.

Those changes include the ability to waive face-to-face meetings so applicants can interview over the phone instead of coming to the Human Services offices in downtown Stockton. And applicants can begin receiving benefits and have up to a year to get fingerprinted, he said.

And in March, the county rolled out a new computer system that allows people to submit applications over the Internet.

Other outreach efforts include training community partners to help applicants and bringing county eligibility workers to a community center in Lodi and another in south Stockton.

Having the eligibility workers in Lodi and south Stockton community centers is good, but it doesn't help those living in Tracy or Manteca, said Tim Viall, executive director of the Emergency Food Bank of Stockton/San Joaquin and part of the hunger task force.

And in a report released last week, statewide organization California Food Policy Advocates estimates about 180,000 San Joaquin County residents are eligible for the program and that less than half are receiving the benefit.

The information is included in the organization's annual "Lost Dollars, Empty Plates" report, which highlights the economic benefits to local communities through federal dollars paid to food program beneficiaries. It estimates the county could receive \$70 million more a year if all those eligible received the benefit.

But the impact would be greater than that amount, because each dollar spent generates economic activity worth \$1.79, according to the report.

"Missing out on those federal funds, and the related economic impact, is just a shame," said Tia Shimada, a nutrition policy advocate with the organization.

There are other counties that do a better job at outreach, said Maria Luisa Rangel, program coordinator with Catholic Charities, which does pre-screening outreach work to help people apply for the benefits. "I still think we could be doing much better as a county."

And, in general, it takes too long for the county to process applications, she said.

Applications that don't submit all the right documents are the biggest culprits in adding to processing times, which is why the county has taken steps such as working with community partners to make sure applications are complete when they are submitted, Chelli said. Except in emergency cases, the processing time takes 30 days.

But those in need of the benefits don't know anything about how long it can take when they seek help for the first time, said Simona Rios, also with Catholic Charities.

"They have shut-off notices. They're at their wits' end," she said. "They're at that point where everything's falling apart."

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