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HUNGER

Food stamp enrollment surges in Napa County

Higher unemployment creates 'food insecurity'

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An estimated 13,000 adults in Napa County could not afford an adequate amount of food and experienced hunger during the recession, according to a recent study.

Throughout California, nearly four million adults — particularly those in households with children — experienced what officials call “food insecurity” in which people are forced to cut their food intake.

Food insecurity “skyrocketed” between 2007 and 2009 when California’s unemployment rate increased from 5 percent to 11 percent, according to last week’s study from the UCLA Center for Health Policy Research.

In Napa County, one measure of food insecurity is the number of families receiving food stamps. Individual enrollment for the food stamp program — known as CalFresh — increased from 4,892 in 2009 to more than 7,000 people in 2011. Family enrollment increased, as well, from 1,789 Napa County families in 2009 to 3,001 in 2011.

The county attributes this increase to an “aggressive outreach effort” in 2010 and 2011. Specific populations — including immigrants, low-income families and the homeless — were targeted for outreach, said Teresa Zimny, deputy director of Napa County’s Health and Human Services.

The use of local food banks also increased during the recession.

In 2011, local food banks served nearly 14,000 people, who visited the emergency food pantries nearly 68,000 times. Napa County has six emergency food pantries, including locations in Napa, American Canyon and Calistoga.

While the number of people served by the food banks decreased during the recession, the number of repeat visits surged. More frequently, the food banks are being used as a regular source of food instead of a back-up source for people in emergency situations, said Shirley King, executive director of the Food Bank Program, which is operated by Community Action Napa Valley.

Napa County food banks distribute approximately 2 million pounds of food per year, King said.

The majority of food bank recipients work in the local service industry. Many are housekeepers,

landscapers and contractors, King said.

When the food bank discovered at the end of 2010 that it was serving fewer people, officials conducted a study. They found that many recipients had moved out of Napa County because the cost of living became too high. Many moved to areas like Lodi, Modesto and Stockton where it's cheaper to live, King said.

"Our clients are working-class poor," King said. "They just don't make enough money to live here."

Some food bank recipients also receive CalFresh benefits, but many others do not qualify due to immigration problems.

More than 60 percent of food bank recipients are Latino, and that number continues to grow each year, King said. While their children may be eligible for CalFresh, the adults often avoid applying for benefits.

"There's a fear that any kind of assistance will come back on them," King said.

In 2009, the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act boosted food stamp benefits by 17 percent, but those subsidies are expected to expire in 2013, according to the study.

"Without the ARRA, many Californians would be in much deeper poverty," said study co-author Gail Harrison. "And with millions of Californians still struggling economically, 2013 is too soon to consider ending this important life-support for our poorest residents."

The study was released the same week that the House Agriculture Committee held hearings on the Farm Bill, which pays for the nation's largest anti-hunger program. On Thursday, the committee passed its version of the bill, which cuts about \$16.5 billion from the food stamp program. The bill still has to be passed by the full House and a consensus must be reached by Congress before the current farm bill expires Sept. 30.

Dave Whitmer, Napa County's agricultural commissioner, said that while he supports certain parts of the farm bill — like replacing direct payments to farmers with crop insurance programs — he finds the cuts to the food stamp program "troubling."

"The (food stamp) program is important to our community," Whitmer said. "Any cuts to that program are difficult."

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