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Florida food stamp system sees 53% jump from 2000

By Shana Gruskin

Staff Writer

Posted February 13 2005

For months, pride kept Guyette Duhart from applying for food stamps.

She'd left a bad relationship, was living in a homeless shelter with her young daughter and expecting another baby within months, but Duhart just couldn't take that last, painful step.

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"I never received food stamps before," said the 36-year-old Lake Worth mother of Ariel, 6, and Michael, 14 months. "I didn't want to be in the `system.'"

Finally -- after having her son, getting an apartment through a local social-service agency, finding work and returning to school

to finish her bachelor's degree in criminal justice -- Duhart gave in.

She admits she still winces every time she has to use her food stamps, which aren't really stamps but like a bank debit card. But the extra \$215 a month does much to ease her \$60- to \$80-a-week grocery bill. And she imagines it would for many Floridians struggling to feed, clothe and shelter their families.

"I don't know how people are making it without food stamps," she said.

Nowadays, many Floridians aren't.

In the Sunshine State, the number of people receiving federally sponsored food stamps soared 53 percent in the past four years to almost 1.4 million residents -- a startling statistic when considering the state's population during the same time period grew 8.4 percent.

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The massive numbers are widespread across South Florida.

Miami-Dade County has seen a 27-percent jump overall, to 333,895 people, when comparing December 2000 to December 2004.

Palm Beach County's food-stamp population leapt 57 percent to 58,700 people, from December 2000 to December 2004.

In Broward County, the growth has been a staggering 92 percent over the same period. As of Dec. 31, 102,238 people received food stamps in the county.

Officials with the state, which administers the federal food program, tout the increase as a sign of progress. They point out that federal and state legislation extended food stamps' availability to groups such as legal immigrants, who used to be excluded from the program. Meanwhile, outreach -- a publicized statewide help line and prescreening by phone -- has made slogging through the bureaucratic process more tolerable. And common-sense changes, such as combining the food-stamp application with other federal nutrition programs, has cut down on the paperwork families must fill out.

But others worry the upswing in recipients reflects a stagnant economy that has left some families scraping pennies to buy food.

"Since 2001, we've got a pretty weak economy," said Ellen Vollinger, legal director for a national public-policy center on food and nutrition. "Some of the increase in the [food stamp] caseload, hopefully, is that we're reaching some of the eligible. But it's probably also that we have a larger pool, in part because there's such a strong need."

An average of 21.3 million people in America -- more than half children -- received food stamps each month in fiscal year 2003, according to the United States Department of Agriculture.

Yet 36 million people, including 13 million children, went hungry or worried about where their next meal was coming from, Vollinger said, quoting a federal hunger report.

Episania Retamar, of Hollywood, has relied on food stamps to help feed her two granddaughters for four years.

She saw her family's monthly allowance get slashed from \$245 to \$115 per month last year when she got a \$6.70-per-hour job cleaning a fast-food restaurant at Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood International Airport. Retamar, 57, wants to be independent and assistance-free, but right now she is glad for the help. She works so hard most days her back aches, but she still does not earn enough to support the family. The extra \$115 she gets from the government enables her family to squeak by.

A recent door-to-door survey in Palm Beach County revealed that

almost 19 percent of working-poor families -- those making \$35,000 a year or less for a family of four -- often make do with small, nutritionally skimpy meals or skip them altogether. That's likely because the cost of living in such an affluent community can be financially draining on families, who are forced to choose between paying rent or buying groceries, social-service advocates say.

"The squeeze between food and housing, between food and medicine, those are often the choices that we're hearing about," said Vollinger, of the Washington, D.C.-based Food Research and Action Center.

Some recent, major changes in food-stamp procedures have attempted to reduce families' stress, and made it easier to apply for aid.

For example, a prescreening tool used by Florida Impact, the state's help line, allows workers to type a family's information into the computer system, estimate how much aid they'd receive and then mail them an already-completed application to sign.

"The experience that we hear from people is that if a client knows he or she is likely to get food stamps and has a pretty good idea of how much they might get, that's a pretty good motivating factor to have them follow through on the process," Vollinger said.

And the four hurricanes that walloped Florida last fall also raised awareness that food stamps are there for anyone in need, said Debra Susie, executive director of Florida Impact, based in Tallahassee.

After the hurricanes, Florida received \$155 million in disaster food-stamp aid from the federal government. In all, more than 1 million people received the one-time benefit to help restock their refrigerators. Some of those people went on to apply for extended food aid.

The help line, on average, gets 1,500 calls a month. But in October, during Florida's post-hurricane recovery, the hotline received 8,000 calls.

Other procedural adjustments, such as giving families more time before having to prove they're eligible for continued aid, also has contributed to the increase in rolls, Vollinger said.

"The word sort of gets around that it's not sitting around all day in three different visits in order to get your certification completed," said Jack Moss, Broward County district administrator for the Department of Children & Families, which administers the federal food stamp program. "We've become a lot more customer-friendly."

Duhart said she's eternally thankful for the help. But she notes visiting her nearby DCF office remains a hassle -- and often a humiliating experience.

In a way though, she said, that's a good thing.

"This is all the push I need to make sure I do the things I have to do so I don't have to be in this office anymore," said Duhart, who expects to graduate from Florida Atlantic University this spring. "I'm so determined."

Shana Gruskin can be reached at sgruskin@sun-sentinel.com or 561-243-6537.



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