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Rolls of NY food stamp recipients on the rise

By MICHAEL GORMLEY 07.23.08, 6:24 PM ET

ALBANY, N.Y. - Hard economic times, layoffs and rising food and fuel costs are boosting the number of New York households using food stamps to nearly 1 million.

Records and interviews Wednesday showed that 1.8 million New Yorkers got help in April from food stamps to help feed their children. That's up by 30,000 adults and children over the last two years and an increase of more than 500,000 since 2001. More than 60 percent of recipients are in New York City.

The state's population is just over 19 million, with about 8 million in New York City.

In addition to the economic pressures, the state has worked over the past five years to make it easier for working poor families to apply for the program. That includes eliminating fingerprinting of recipients outside New York City. Food stamps can provide \$200 a month for groceries.

Measures under Gov. David Paterson's push to better serve the working poor include providing more places to apply for food stamps and reducing the penalty for receiving some other benefits, such as help paying heating bills in the winter.

Yet, despite a recent federal increase in the benefit and New York's campaign to increase use of food stamps to the working poor, food pantries and soup kitchens continue to serve more New Yorkers, said Mark Dunlea of the Hunger Action Network of New York.

"The state did some very good things recently," Dunlea said, "but we need more."

The complex problem includes the rising cost of housing, which he said now takes up to 60 percent of the family budget for the working poor.

"And everybody is terrified about heating costs," Dunlea said, reacting to forecast increased costs of heating fuel for the winter. "That's just going to create an avalanche for food pantries and soup kitchens."

Working poor families in rural Herkimer County are feeling the pain. There, 63 more cases for food stamps were opened in June compared to May, for a total of 3,305 cases. The county of 63,332 people had an unemployment rate of 5.5 percent in June, compared to 4.2 percent in June 2007.

"It's not necessarily all poor people," county Social Service Commissioner Erving Fuller told the Utica Observer-Dispatch. "There are working families who don't earn enough to support their families in many cases."

State records show food stamps served about 1.66 million New Yorkers in 1998, hit a recent low of under 1.3 million in 2001, then steadily rose with a sharper increase in the last 18 months.

In New York City, the number of meals served in soup kitchens and food pantries was 9 percent higher in spring than a year before, according to the New York City Coalition Against Hunger. That was an estimated 1 million free meals provided in April by charities.

"Last fall, as the recession started to hit and more feeding programs began to run out of food, the situation for hungry New Yorkers went from bad to worse," said Joel Berg, Executive Director of the New York City Coalition Against Hunger. "But now that food prices are soaring, and ever-more people are flooding into pantries and kitchens, the situation has gone from worse to worser."

Dunlea said that even with the federal increase in the benefit, worth \$10 or more a month to most recipients, many families find food stamps run out about 21 or so days into the month. They then turn to food pantries.

A minimum benefit for those who qualify under a formula that includes the number of children in a family, wages, other public assistance and any child support payments is now up to \$14 a month, from \$10.

For example, a mother living upstate making \$8.50 an hour, or about \$16,000 a year, with two children at home could receive about \$2,600 worth of food stamps in a year. A similar New York City family would also get about \$200 worth of food stamps per month.

"Clearly the economy has played a role in this, but we really are taking a lot of steps to make this more accessible," said state spokesman Mike Hayes. He said about 30 percent to 40 percent of New Yorkers believed to be eligible for food stamps don't apply, so there is enough federal funding already allocated to handle an increase.

Nationwide, food prices in April took their biggest one-month leap in 18 years and are rising at a rate well above last year's increase. Milk costs 10.2 percent more than it did a year ago. The U.S. Labor Department said consumer prices rose 1.1 percent in June, nearly the fastest pace in a generation, as gasoline hit record highs.