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Arkansas Democrat-Gazette (Little Rock)

March 28, 2003 Friday

SECTION: FRONT SECTION

LENGTH: 1073 words

HEADLINE: Number of Arkansans on food stamps rising

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BODY:

More Arkansans used food stamps to buy basic groceries in 2002 than during any other year in almost a decade - a sure sign, experts say, that the weak economy has left a growing number of state residents needing help to survive.

If current trends hold, the number of food stamp recipients in Arkansas will soon reach an all-time high, if it isn't there already, state officials say.

"This is the highest number I can recall in my 28 years with the program," said Georgia Gilkey, Arkansas food stamp program manager.

On average, 284,000 Arkansans received food stamps each month from October 2001 through September 2002, up from 256,000 a year before, according to new data from the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Initial estimates for December 2002 showed 302,000 Arkansans receiving food stamps. That's slightly above alltime high participation numbers from the early 1990s.

"The demand for help is going up," said Hope Coulter, executive director of the Arkansas Hunger Coalition. "People are hurting."

The increase also shows that the state's efforts to enroll poor Arkansans in the food stamp program - along with slightly looser food stamp eligibility rules - are working, officials say. About \$264 million in food stamp benefits was given to Arkansans during fiscal 2002. All of that money comes from the federal government and goes into Arkansas' economy, but it is not nearly so much as would be generated if all food stamp participants had jobs that pay well.

"People are spending food stamp dollars in our state," said Rhonda Sanders, coordinated systems liaison for Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families. "That money is still rolling around out there doing good."

The food stamp program is a federal initiative to help poor families get the food they need to survive. Families or individuals must meet certain income requirements - a family of three, for example, cannot earn more than roughly \$19,000 a year - to qualify for the program. Participants also must be looking for work or already have a job unless caring for children younger than 6.

The stamps generally are used only to buy food. A family of three in the food stamp program will receive a maximum of roughly \$360 in stamps a month. Most food stamp recipients are children, according to federal data. Almost 45 percent of households with children on food stamps have at least one family member earning income; they are the "working poor."

Experts cite the slumping economy as the main reason for the rise in food stamp rolls.

"Most of these people, if they can be given a little bit of a push, they have the ability to get above the poverty line," said Bob Adkison, executive director of the Arkansas River Valley Area Council, a community action agency serving poor families in Franklin, Logan, Conway, Yell, Perry, Johnson, Pope, Polk and Scott counties.

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"They will survive or exist," he added, "but if they hit the proverbial banana peel, they could be in trouble."

Mable Harris is one of those "survivors," but she is not living comfortably.

Harris was hopeful when she came to Little Rock, but she is almost ready to give up on the city. She arrived here a few months ago with her son and her daughter from Kansas City but hopes to move somewhere else soon because, she said, good jobs in Little Rock are scarce.

"I'm looking for work," said Harris, who is on food stamps. "I can't get one."

And that has been one of the biggest reasons for the jump in food stamp participation, officials say: a lack of good jobs.

Since 2000, the number of nonfarm jobs in Arkansas has dropped slightly, even as the population has grown, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. About 29,000 of those lost jobs were in manufacturing. The remaining jobs, officials say, often do not pay as much as the ones lost or replaced.

"Even many of our military are on food stamps," Coulter said. "They don't make enough to get by."

Many food stamp participants need extra help before they can take a job; most food stamp households with children are run by single mothers, according to federal data. Those mothers often can't take work until someone helps with their children.

North Little Rock resident Ann Smith relies largely on food stamps to feed her seven children. "The older ones tend to eat more and snack more the older they get."

Smith, who lives alone with her children, said she is looking for a job but needs to find child care before she can start working. "I just had a baby," she said. "She's 4 weeks old."

A slight easing of eligibility rules has allowed more people to qualify for food stamps. The easing has added to the increased numbers. For example, poor families now can own a nice car and still qualify for food stamps, said Gilkey, who works with the state Department of Human Services. That is new. Under old rules, a parent just laid off from a job at the factory might be unable to collect food stamps because his \$5,000 car put him over the roughly \$2,000 asset limit.

The state has also tried harder to persuade those eligible for food stamps to apply. Officials have no estimate of how many people their efforts have added to the food stamp rolls, but they say the efforts have made a difference.

"It's sort of a mixed bag," Coulter said. "It's not good that people are vulnerable. But it is good that the government is supporting them."

Food stamps alone, however, are often not enough to sustain families. Little Rock resident Tina Jones has been on food stamps seven years. She said the food stamps aren't adequate to pay for her food. "It's not nearly enough," she said. "They don't give you nothing really."

Jones spoke while sitting in The Helping Hand of Greater Little Rock, a food pantry on the south side of town. Thousands of people go to the pantry every month, many to supplement their food stamps. The number of people served at the pantry is growing.

"For the past fiscal year, we saw the highest number of people ever," said Bruce Limozaine, executive director at the pantry. Helping Hand aided 23,405 people last year, up almost 16 percent from 2001. Other food services saw similar increases.

The trends, along with increased numbers of Arkansans on food stamps, probably will continue as long as the economy - and wages - remain in a slump, Sanders said.

"This is obviously indicative of people losing jobs," she said. "When you see food stamp numbers going up, you are beginning to see the effects of the economy."

This article was published 3/28/2003

LOAD-DATE: February 17, 2005