

Rochester region sees food stamp explosion

Since the Great Recession began in 2007, the number of people in the six-county region using food stamps has grown by nearly 50 percent. In that time, spending on the program locally has doubled.

Although a portion of that increase may be attributable to a drive to get more eligible people signed up, there's no denying that the uptick is a sign of ongoing economic distress. It comes at a time when incomes nationwide are down and poverty is on the rise. It's a symptom reflected in increased demand at local food pantries and mirrors food insecurity trends nationwide.

It's putting stress on local service agencies and on residents who feel the American Dream slipping from their grasp.

"I became a teacher because I believed that education can get you out of poverty," said Maria DeMarquez of Greece. A special education teacher for seven years, DeMarquez hasn't been able to find a full-time job since being laid off a year ago. A homeowner and single mom of two daughters, she said her income has dropped from \$44,000 a year to \$15,000.

She's reaching the end of hope.

"I'm three months behind on my mortgage and I just signed up for food stamps," she said.

Food insecurity

About one in five Americans would qualify for most federal nutrition programs. The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, as food stamps are now known, is a federally funded program that provides cash assistance to low-income individuals. Benefits are given monthly on an Electronic Benefits Transfer card that is used like a debit card to purchase food.

To qualify, a family of four must have an annual income of no more than \$28,668. The federal government's poverty guideline is an annual income of \$22,314 for a family of four.

The average SNAP benefit in New York state is about \$150 per person per month.

But what people receive is often far less.

Advertisement



**Protect Your Home
with ADT!**

ADT AUTHORIZED DEALER

[Click Here
to Learn More!](#)

Print Powered By  FormatDynamics™

"I have lots of senior citizens who sign up with just a Social Security income of about \$689 a month, who find out they only qualify for \$16 in food stamps," said Debbie Evans, president of the Irondequoit Community Cupboard food bank. "They're so angry about it, they don't even want it. But I tell them to take it anyway. ... It's bread or it's milk."

Evans said she's seeing more families like DeMarquez's coming in for help.

One out of every seven people in Monroe County is using food stamps. In Livingston, Genesee and Ontario counties, it's one out of every 10.

"We've had record numbers of people coming into the pantry this whole summer," Evans said. "And I've got a ton of calls on my machine every time I come home. A lot of the calls are from senior citizens and people who are still being laid off, or people who have been laid off and their unemployment is gone and they still haven't found work."

At Evans' food bank, clients can get an emergency seven-day supply of food once a month. That's three meals a day for everyone in a family.

Last month, the Irondequoit Community Cupboard helped feed 135 households.

A year ago September, the pantry served 85 households.

At Mission Share food pantry in Greece, the story's much the same.

"Between January and September of this year, we've seen a 50 percent increase in the number of people we're serving versus the same time period last year," said Tom Hakes, executive director. "And even in the last couple months, we've been seeing some insane numbers. We served 201 families last month. That's more than 643 people."

Tom Ferraro, executive director of Foodlink, Rochester's regional food bank, said he's seen a huge increase in food needs locally since the recession began in 2007, particularly in suburban towns.

"The numbers are actually down in the city somewhat," he said. "But our numbers are going through the roof in places like Rush and Henrietta and Greece."

His agency distributed more than 12 million pounds of food within its 10-county service area last year, an increase of 75 percent over 2007.

"At the beginning of this recession, people

Advertisement

**Protect Your Home
with ADT!**

**Click Here
to Learn More!**

ADT AUTHORIZED DEALER

Print Powered By FormatDynamics™

were comparing it to the recession in the early 1980s and thinking we'd come right out of it," Ferraro said. "But this time people are carrying mortgages that are such a heavy lift and unemployment is not going down all that much. At some point in time those people in the 1980s went back to work, and this time they're not getting back to work and if they are going back, it's certainly not to a job where they were making as much as before."

Indeed, the Great Recession and its aftermath have taken a toll across all income levels. In inflation-adjusted dollars, the Monroe County median household income — \$49,532 — is down about 20 percent since 2000.

Improved access

Recent changes to SNAP that were designed to get more of those who are eligible to sign up for food stamps may account for the large four-year increase in use, said Nancy Fogue, Monroe County's financial assistance director.

Since 2007, the U.S. Department of Agriculture has jettisoned the colorful food stamp coupons, instituted electronic debit cards and renamed the program. Then, the agency made it easier to apply. People can now sign up electronically, recertify with telephone interviews and prescreen online.

"You cannot be casual about the change in procedures as one of the reasons for the increase," said Kent Gardner, chief economist with the Center for

Governmental Research in Rochester.

"There is certainly a group of people who are desperately poor and can't get along without the benefits, but there are a lot of people at the margins who can go on and off ... and if you're on the edge, you may choose just not to go through the trouble of signing up."

Fogue agreed.

"Access has a lot to do with it," she said. "And some of the eligibility was relaxed, especially around resources. Folks used to be ineligible because they had some money in the bank."

SNAP recipients are allowed to have up to \$2,000 in countable resources, such as a bank account. Elderly or disabled people are allowed to have as much as \$3,000 in countable assets.

Still, in Monroe County, about 13 percent of residents don't always have access to enough food to maintain a healthy, active lifestyle, according to Feeding America, a

Advertisement

**Protect Your Home
with ADT!**

**Click Here
to Learn More!**

ADT AUTHORIZED DEALER

Print Powered By FormatDynamics™

national network of food banks. That's roughly the same proportion statewide.

Influence of economy

The continuing economic woes haven't yet alleviated financial strains on families or on local service agencies.

More than 15 percent of Monroe County residents live in poverty — right in line with the national number, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. And that's the largest proportion of people reported in poverty in the half-century the census has published such estimates.

In Ontario County, the poverty rate was 9.9 percent, an increase of 62 percent since 2009, the largest increase in poverty in the state, according to census figures released in September.

The reasons are complex, but a major factor is continuing economic globalization, said Gardner.

"In the 1990s, the competition was for unskilled and semi-skilled jobs," he said. "And the longer we go, the more effective our competitors become at competing up the skill level."

Also, during the 2000s, "industry as a whole eliminated middle management jobs. So we were not losing those unskilled minimum-wage jobs, but losing jobs a good bit further up the food chain."

Gary Keith, an economist with M&T Bank, said he believes Rochester's future

economic outlook is positive.

"This is not going to be a normal recovery from what was the deepest recession since the Great Depression," he said. "But clearly we're seeing moderate job growth, and there's been an increase in gross domestic output for the country. The country is growing, it's just very, very slow."

What sets Rochester apart, he said, is a highly skilled and adaptable workforce. And the new economy will not be the same as it was before the downturn.

"If you have the skills employers need and are willing to work hard to adapt to change, you will do OK," he said.

Keith said there has been "a fundamental shift in the economy and social structure and expectations that people have about work lives and lives in general. This isn't like recessions like we've seen in the past several decades where things would snap back and everyone was fine."

Advertisement

**Protect Your Home
with ADT!**

**Click Here
to Learn More!**

ADT AUTHORIZED DEALER

Print Powered By  FormatDynamics™

DeMarquez, a Brooklyn native who came to the Rochester area to attend St. John Fisher College, said she was one of those people who thought she'd never need food stamps.

And she tried to avoid signing up.

To get through the months without full-time work, she drew down her savings, canceled cable and Internet and shut off her cellphone. She sold her guitar, the piano and even her lawnmower.

DeMarquez said she feels betrayed.

"When we were younger, we were all told get an education, get an education, get an education and everything would be OK," she said. "But it's not."

MCDERMOT@DemocratandChronicle.com

For more information

For further information about food stamps, you may call the Office of Temporary and Disability Services toll-free hotline at (800) 342-3009 and press "1" for food stamps or contact your local department of social services.

What do SNAP benefits buy?

According to the USDA, SNAP benefits can be used for foods such as breads and cereals, fruits and vegetables, meats, fish, poultry and dairy products. Seeds and plants that will produce food can also be purchased.

What about junk food? Soft drinks, candy,

cookies, snack crackers and ice cream are food items and can be purchased with SNAP benefits.

What about "luxury foods"? Seafood, steak and bakery cakes are also food items. What can't I buy? Beer, wine, liquor, pet foods, non-food items such as soap or paper products, vitamins, hot food and food that will be eaten in the store.



Greece residents Isaiiah Williamson and his grandmother Ali Annah stock food at the Mission Share Outreach Center in Greece. The center provides food and clothes to those in need in four ZIP code area neighborhoods of Greece. / Carlos Ortiz/staff photographer

Advertisement

**Protect Your Home
with ADT!**



**Click Here
to Learn More!**

Print Powered By  FormatDynamics™