

Tough times bring out new group of Morris residents who need food stamps

Morris agency sees first-timers turn out for aid

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WHARTON --The number of visitors to the public assistance van in the ShopRite parking lot Wednesday both troubled and pleased Gary Denamen, director of the Morris County Office of Temporary Assistance.

The van, borrowed from Essex County for the day, allowed office staff to take applications for food stamps from Morris County residents and provide information of other available services.

In four hours, Denamen said, the staff met with 24 residents and referred at least eight others to the Dover office for help.

What was pleasing about the turnout, Denamen said, is that with an average interview of 45 minutes, his staff was meeting with applicants the whole time they were in Wharton.

That was also the bad news, along with this: "They were all first-timers," Denamen said.

The appearance of more than 30 first-time applicants for food stamps in four hours, many of whom have jobs but cannot make enough to pay all their living expenses, Denamen said, reinforces the evidence of troubled times seen across the division: A 6 percent increase this year in the number of applicants for financial aid as the county's unemployment rate hit 4.3 percent last month, up 1.3 percent from 2007.

The state labor department reported Wednesday that the state lost 3,900 jobs in September, 1,900 of which were in the financial services industry, an indication the worldwide financial meltdown is starting to have an effect here. The state has lost 21,000 jobs this year, the labor department said. The rate, of about one out of every 200 jobs, is about the same as the national rate of lost jobs. Denamen said that early in the year applicants sought food stamps because they were making the choice between buying food or fuel to get to work. But now with winter looming, the choices could be eating or paying a bill to heat their homes. People now are making choices based on being able to stay in their homes.

Government estimates say that heating costs could rise between 75 to 100 percent compared to last year, Denamen said.

Mary Jo Buchanan, director of the county department of human services, said the increasing numbers of applicants for financial aid raises three concerns.

First, she said, is the sense that these applicants are just the beginning of what could be a larger wave of people seeking public help as the economy continues to sour.

"I'm concerned about the magnitude," she said. "This is just the beginning."

When she was told that all the applicants in Wharton Wednesday were first-timers, Buchanan said, "Wow. That's a sign of the need."

She said her other concerns as this situation evolves is related to how her staff will be able to respond to increased needs, given that there are 15 open positions in the Office of Temporary Assistance, and the prospects of further cuts in the county budget next year, and the impact on area nonprofit agencies.

Those agencies are seeing larger numbers of people with needs, but are operating with reduced funding from both government and agency sources, she said.

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