

# Welfare requests spike in Morris County

by [Lawrence Ragonese](#)/[The Star-Ledger](#)

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Welfare requests by needy families in affluent Morris County have risen almost 6 percent over the past year, the second highest increase statewide, as many county residents seek government help to deal with the impact of the economic downturn and job losses, said county officials.

Many people seeking assistance are new to the welfare system, requesting aid for the first time to deal with mounting bills, to put food on their tables and to heat their homes, Morris County Human Services Director Mary Jo Buchanan said today.

"It's very concerning," said Buchanan, who said the requests for help have expanded in recent months beyond a core of lower-income residents in the Morristown and Dover areas. "These are truck drivers coming in who can't find work. Senior citizens who have never before requested help but can't get by. That's not good."

Residents in the nation's seventh most affluent county are requesting cash, food stamps, food supplies, help in paying utility bills and rent. Some need a temporary place to live.

It was announced today that a mobile outreach office will be set up from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. next Wednesday at the ShopRite supermarket in Wharton, to make it more convenient for residents in need to meet with county social service workers and apply for food stamps.

"Business for us is good, unfortunately," said Gary Denamen, director of the Morris County Office of Temporary Assistance. "Money is not stretching far enough for many families. I'm concerned this winter there will be even more of a strain, especially as people have to deal with utility bills."

Denamen said his agency's offices in Morris Township have been filled to overflowing in recent weeks, taxing the abilities and energy of his staff. In addition to dealing with rising welfare rolls, his staff also is processing a marked increase in emergency situations, helping people who are homeless or struggling to keep their homes.

That emergency aid has increased by 79 percent this year, from about \$1.1 million in 2007 to \$1.6 million, he said.

Part of the need has been caused by a loss of jobs, with the county's unemployment rate rising to 4.3 percent this year, up from 3 percent a year ago, though lower than the state's 5.7 percent rate, officials said. That does not include the number of people who have used up their unemployment insurance eligibility and are no longer counted, said Maggie Peters, director of the Morris County Economic Development Corp.

"I would not trust that the state's unemployment numbers are accurate," Peters said.

The growing assistance needs have not just strained government programs but the entire county human services network.

For example, the Interfaith Food Pantry based in Morris Township is getting more requests for food from lower middle-class families who have jobs but cannot deal with rising costs of housing and food. Pantry officials said the amount of food given out this year is 19 percent higher than last year and 23 percent higher than two years ago.

Elizabeth "Betsy" Hall, executive director of Homeless Solutions, said her non-profit agency is overwhelmed with requests for temporary housing. The organization received nearly 300 applications for placement in 12 transitional housing units it opened in Morris Township last week, she said.

"And I don't think we've yet seen many people who lost homes due to foreclosures, who may be living with families for the short term," said Hall. "But I think we'll be hearing from them soon."