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## More Utahns seek government aid

Economy » Changes to the program that helps the poor will help more people qualify.

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The number of poor Utahns turning to the government for financial assistance has spiked 30 percent since last year, new data show.

And as the recession continues, state officials plan to change one of the eligibility rules for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, the program that replaced welfare.

While that will add more people to the system, the number of households receiving money remains tiny compared with the number of Utahns using food stamps.

A total of 6,797 Utah households were on public assistance as of May, the most recent number available. By contrast, 83,385 households were receiving food assistance as of June.

Advocates attribute that disparity, in part, to the different monthly income limits. A family of three can make no more than \$1,050 per month to qualify for TANF. To be eligible for food stamps, a family of three can typically make as much as \$1,907 per month.

Karen Silver, an advocate with the anti-poverty Salt Lake Community Action Program, believes the TANF income limits exclude many Utahns. The state has not increased the income limits since the 1990s.

"If we indexed for inflation, then more people could qualify," she said.

Another reason more people may not seek out public assistance dollars is their stereotype.

"Part of it is the stigma," said Melissa Smith, an analyst with the Community Action Partnership of Utah. The attitude, she said, may be: "I live in Sandy -- I don't need to be on welfare." But the state is planning to capture more families by temporarily extending assistance time limits. Starting potentially in September, the change would affect a resident who has been recently laid off, has essentially no other income and has previously maxed out the 36-month time limit for TANF.

How many people that would affect remains unknown.

"We're trying to think of ways to help people who are in this very serious situation through no fault of their own," said Helen Thatcher, an assistant director at the Department of Workforce Services.

To qualify for TANF, a resident must have children or children in their care, have little or no income and minimal assets. The majority of people on public assistance are required to complete "work participation," which is typically 30 hours a week. That may include job training or work-site learning, such as volunteering at the Salvation Army.

The children of an undocumented immigrant are eligible for public assistance dollars if the kids are U.S. citizens. "We care about citizens," Thatcher said.

The number of people on the TANF program dropped steeply after 2006 because of tougher requirements for work participation. People who had any type of alternative often took it rather than relying on the government.

"People think we still have welfare," Thatcher said. "We don't."

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