

Wasatch County Poverty Rate Well Below State Average

SPECIAL TO THE WAVE

Heber, Utah – According to an annual report released by the State of Utah and the Community Action Partnership of Utah (CAP Utah), Wasatch County's poverty rate of six percent is well below the state's average rate of 10 percent, making the county the third lowest rate in the state. Morgan and Summit County are four percent and five percent respectively.

The 2009 Annual Report on Poverty in Utah documents statistics and factors as to why the number of families in poverty fluctuates.

"This is the first time in decades that Utah is seeing families who have lived in the middle class for their entire lives teeter on the poverty line," said CAP Utah Executive Director Heather Tritten. "This is a frightening experience, especially for those families who have always been self-sufficient, as they try to figure out how to keep their house, feed their kids, and compete for the few jobs that are available."

One key finding from CAP Utah's report is how poverty has infiltrated Utah's middle and working class families. In 2007, more than 250,000 people, or 10 percent of all Utah residents, lived below the poverty level; additionally, 91,000 or 11 percent of all Utah children lived below the poverty level. Eight percent of children in Wasatch County live in poverty.

A January 2009 assessment of Utah's nine Community Action Agencies, which help impoverished families get back to full, quality employment, showed 61 percent of people seeking services were doing so for the first time ever.

Utah's unemployment rate jumped 58 percent in 2008 to just above five percent. Wasatch County's unemployment rate is just below six percent.

The Utah Dept. of Workforce Services has seen a 195 percent increase in initial filings for unemployment insurance benefits since 2008. Another indicator of Utah's poverty levels is the change in food stamp caseloads. Wasatch County increased its food stamp caseload by 37 percent between 2007 and 2008, which is greater than the 30 percent increase the state of Utah experienced in the same time period.

CAP Utah and State of Utah experts believe that several factors have caused the rise of poverty in Utah. First, Utah's average wage is 80 percent of the national wage, which is the 37th lowest in the nation. Utah also has the nation's second lowest per-capita income at \$30,291 as compared with the national average of \$36,751.

"Families are facing additional difficulties due to increasing healthcare premiums and out-of-pocket costs, and this is contributing to families looking at poverty for the first

time," Tritten said. "Over the last decade, the portion of premiums paid by Utah families increased 73 percent and their portions of premiums increased 98 percent. This contributes to the fact that 67 percent of our state's uninsured are actually working families."

As a result of Congress passing the stimulus package, CAP Utah was able to receive grants in an effort to improve emergency housing services allowing people to remain stable in their homes while they look for employment or recover from a crisis.

The state will also continue to work with CAP and county organizations to increase programs serving homeless populations. Work programs, training opportunities and access to education will be improved and expanded. Utah's Community Action Agencies will be increasing services, putting a new focus on job creation and training.

Although our goal of reducing poverty is daunting, we can make great strides by working together," Tritten said. "The Poverty Report helps communities become aware about the challenges facing so many Utah families. But the most important step is becoming engaged in making a difference."

The full 2009 Annual Report on Poverty in Utah is available online at www.caputah.org.