



**Date:** January 22, 2009

**General questions:** Lauri Stewart, DHS 503-884-8797 or 503-945-6008

**Technical questions:**

## **Need for cash assistance and food stamps reaches emergency levels in Oregon**

---

As Oregon unemployment figures continue to rise and demand for temporary economic help such as cash assistance and food stamps has hit record levels, the Oregon Department of Human Services is calling the situation an emergency.

The state's rising unemployment figures rose to 9 percent in December, according to figures released Tuesday by the Department of Employment, with the deepest declines in the leisure and hospitality and construction sectors.

Over the same period, requests for Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), which provides emergency cash and job training to low income parents, have increased 16.4 percent since December 2007 for a total number of 21,633 families. The number of people receiving food stamps benefits also continued to climb, increasing 15.5 percent statewide since December 2007, for a total of 520,650 people.

"We're treating this huge increase in client need as an emergency. That means we are redeploying staff to the areas of the state with the greatest need so we can take care of the new clients coming through the door. That isn't a long-term solution because it leaves other critical work undone, but in an emergency, you do business differently," says Erinn Kelley-Siel, Interim Director of the Children Adults and Families (CAF) division of DHS, which administers the TANF and food stamp economic assistance.

To better serve the new clients, CAF is shifting staff to the overwhelmed offices and using federal bonus money to hire 60 additional staff to help cover rising need.

Also, starting February 2, CAF will roll out an improved intake process for food stamps and other benefits designed to provide same-day service, instead of wait times of a week or more for intake appointments. The streamlined process was developed and successfully tested as part of the DHS Transformation Initiative, employing the proven "lean" methodology used by private industry and government.

Regionally, Washington County residents were hit hard in December, with 30.6 percent more people receiving emergency cash assistance over last year and 16.5 percent more requesting food stamps. Central Oregon residents of Bend, Madras and Prineville continue to have difficulty making ends meet; there has been a 22 percent increase in people receiving cash assistance, and 26.3 percent for food stamps. Southern Oregon residents of Medford, Grants Pass and Ashland are also having a tough time, and 24 percent more have turned to the state for cash assistance and 20.2 percent more for food stamps. Clackamas County had a 23.1 percent increase in cash assistance recipients and 18.1 percent for food stamps.

"We have incredibly dedicated staff working really hard, and we're doing everything we can to find better ways to meet demand and get people the services they need right now," says Kelley-Siel.

One thing clients can do to speed the process of receiving assistance is to make sure to bring all necessary identification and paperwork, says Kelley-Siel. For most services a photo ID, Social Security Number and proof of recent income are enough to start the process.

To determine eligibility for Food Stamps, TANF, Oregon Health Plan or other services, people are encouraged to visit their local DHS Food Stamps office, or go to: [www.oregonhelps.org](http://www.oregonhelps.org). To download applications for TANF and Food Stamps, go to: [www.oregon.gov/DHS/assistance](http://www.oregon.gov/DHS/assistance).

DHS also partners with SafeNet to help people to find local resources such as local food pantries or other assistance. The number is 800-SAFENET (800-723-3638).

### **Background information and definitions:**

Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) is not equivalent to the old program known as "welfare," which was a long-term cash assistance program and no longer exists.

TANF is also known as cash assistance and provides only temporary assistance for families struggling due to unemployment, underemployment, or incapacitation of a primary wage earner. TANF benefits are funded by state general fund dollars which

are used to leverage federal funds. Cash assistance has strict time limits and residency and participation requirements. To be eligible, the total monthly income limit is \$795 for a two-parent family with 2 kids, along with an asset limit of \$2,500 (not including the family home, or the first \$10,000 value of family vehicles). In order to receive benefits, recipients have to be searching for a job or increasing job readiness. The program also works with parents to become employed, be financially stable and self-sufficient. TANF benefits for a family of four total \$647 per month.

Food stamp benefits are paid with federal funds, while administrative costs are shared with the states. To qualify for food stamps, families must earn less than 185 percent of the federal poverty level. For a family of four, that would be less than \$3,268 per month. Benefits are determined on a sliding scale up to a maximum of \$588 for four people, and distributed through the "Oregon Trail Card" that works like a debit card. Many working families turn to these benefits when their monthly income does not stretch enough to cover rent, health care, food and other basics.