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Technical questions:

Highest jobless figure in five years increases need for state assistance

Percentage of Oregonians requiring food and cash assistance increases - Washington and Clackamas Counties now among hardest hit

As Oregon's unemployment figures jumped to the highest rate in five years and families deplete their own resources, the number of people receiving economic assistance from the Oregon Department of Human Service (DHS) continues to rise to record levels. Statewide, the number of households receiving cash assistance through Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and the number of people receiving food stamp benefits are up about 15 percent since November 2007.

The Winslow family of Grants Pass have been receiving food and medical support through their local DHS office. Brian Winslow has been unemployed for most of last year in spite of participating in the state-funded JOBS program to improve his prospects.

"There just aren't enough jobs out there," he says, and this time of year makes being his job loss particularly hard for him, his wife and his baby daughter.

"We're doing the best we can," he says. "But the holidays are going to be hard."

The November client need for Food Stamps was more than half a million people – 507,039 individuals, or about 13 percent of Oregonians. The November client need for TANF cash assistance is about 21,850 families with children. Of those, about 54 percent are applying for assistance for the first time.

People in Southern and Central Oregon continue to be hit hard by current economic conditions, but residents of Clackamas and Washington counties also sought

economic assistance in large numbers. The largest increases in people receiving benefits this month for cash assistance (TANF) were:

- 28 percent increase over Nov. 2007 in Washington County (Hillsboro, Beaverton, Tigard, Cornelius);
- A 25 percent increase in the Southern Oregon areas of Medford, Ashland, and Grants Pass;
- 22 percent in Clackamas County (Clackamas, Oregon City) and in the Central Oregon area (including Bend, Redmond, Prineville, Madras, and Warm Springs).

The largest increases in people receiving food stamps were:

- Nearly 28 percent in Central Oregon (Bend area);
- 19 percent in Southern Oregon (Medford area);
- Nearly 18 percent in Clackamas.

Multnomah County is seeing increases of about 11 percent since last year for both cash assistance (TANF) and food stamps.

“Oregonians need economic supports for a variety of reasons and this year we continue to see people who are newly unemployed,” says Erinn Kelley-Siel, Assistant Director for the Children, Adults and Families Division of DHS, which oversees the TANF and Food Stamps programs. “We have added staff and targeted resources and are working to get people the help they need as soon as possible.”

One thing that will help speed up the process when applying for economic assistance is to make sure to bring all the proper 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.

The agency has taken a number of steps to address the challenge of increased caseloads and a shrinking budget, shifting staff to where the need is greatest and using some federal bonus funds to hire 60 additional people to help process food stamp applications, and streamlining processes to provide faster services.

Temporary Assistance for Needy Families provides cash assistance to families who have children under the age of 18. To qualify for TANF, families must have very few assets and little or no income. The current maximum monthly benefit for a family of three is \$528. Clients are expected to participate in the JOBS employment and training program.

Food Stamp benefits are 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. Benefits are determined on a sliding scale, from \$14 to \$426 per month for a family of three.

Together, these important services provide critical assistance to help families to bridge the gap when faced with unemployment, unexpected health care costs, or other economic challenges. Unemployment figures for Oregon released Monday show the current unemployment rate is 8.1 percent, up from 7.3 percent in October, and from 5.4 percent at this time last year. The national unemployment rate is 6.7 percent.

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. To download applications for TANF and Food Stamps, go to: 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).