

Food stamp use doubles in Georgia

By: Michael E. Kanell – June 23, 2013

Four years after the end of the recession, the economy has been growing, employers have been hiring and the number of people relying on food stamps in Georgia has been going ... up.

A year ago, the program provided food assistance to a record 1.91 million people in the state, nearly one-quarter of them 6 years old or younger. By this June, the program had added 40,000 more recipients, according to the state Department of Human Services.

Those numbers have nearly doubled since the economy slid into recession in late 2007.

Georgia suffered more than most states and is still hundreds of thousands of jobs below its pre-recession levels. Moreover, many jobs that have been added are low-paying positions. About 58 percent of working-age recipients are working.

Meanwhile, Georgia has surged from having the 15th-highest proportion of food stamp recipients to sixth-highest.

The program, officially named the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, now costs about \$78 billion a year and has been targeted for cuts. In June, the U.S. Senate passed a farm bill that trimmed food stamp spending by \$4.1 billion over a decade. Not long after, the House of Representatives passed its own version of the farm bill that didn't include food stamps at all. Congress is expected to work out some kind of compromise, but the issue will likely remain polarizing.

"A lot of people who, before the recession, were above the food stamp level are now below," said Mike Konczal, fellow at the Roosevelt Institute. "Food stamps in this recovery have been a much more fundamental part of the social safety net."

For instance, before the recession, things might have been tough for Pat Norris and her fiancé, Joe, but they were getting by. He installed tile. She cleaned homes and helped care for some older folks.

Then, the challenges started to mount for the Buford couple. They had to care for her grandchildren. Joe got sick and had to stop working. And her clients, one by one, started cutting back until she had no income at all.

With Social Security and disability benefits, they have about \$1,500 a month.

"I buy large packs of ground beef and chicken and cereal in big boxes," she said. "I buy a lot of vegetables and fruit --- turnip greens and cauliflower. We eat a lot of cereal."

So they are happy to have SNAP: \$278 a month. They use it and then spend about \$150 more of their own, Norris said. "Without food stamps, we would just do without a lot."

Critics argue that food stamps may help short-term but are part of a harmful pattern.

"I think all of these programs, taken together, do create a broad disincentive for personal responsibility," said economist Chris Edwards of the Cato Institute. "The more of these programs there are, the less incentives for moderate income people to rise above it and to improve themselves."

Eligibility has been loosened during both Democratic and Republican administrations, he said. Also, a higher proportion have been signed up --- about 72 percent of those eligible in Georgia. "There's been a marketing push for more people to use food stamps. Historically, about 50 or 60 percent of people who were eligible took it."

Nicholas Eberstadt, a political economist at the American Enterprise Institute, said SNAP is sold as a nutrition program, but it's really not one, since there are no restrictions on what kind of food the recipient can buy.

Since the program uses a kind of debit card, SNAP is less about paternalism than redistribution, he said. "If we mean it to be an income-transfer program, we should just say it. If you want to treat the problem of poverty as a shortage of resources, then you give them more resources."

There's more to poverty than economic status, Eberstadt argued. "But what if it's behavior or culture? What if it's misery? You can be miserable with a pretty high level of resources."

When it comes to the economics, Georgia took a harder-than-average pounding. Nearly one in five Georgians receives food stamps, and they are sprinkled through the state: rural, urban and suburban.

The Food and Nutrition Service estimates that every one dollar in new benefits generates up to \$1.80 in economic activity. A \$1 billion increase in benefits creates or supports 18,000 jobs, including 3,000 farm jobs, according to the FNS.

But whatever stimulus SNAP provides is not enough to change the trajectory of an economy when growth is slow, hiring anemic and wages stagnant. So, the pool of potential recipients is not going to shrink quickly. In fact, the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office estimates it will take a decade before food stamp levels return to anything close to the pre-recession level of 2007.

"The recession made a big hole, and it's going to take a long time to fill it," said Rachel Black, senior policy analyst in the asset building program of the New America Foundation. "Unemployment rate is going down, but a lot of jobs are at reduced hours and at a reduced wage."

In the meantime, it's not just federal government offering food assistance.

Food stamps are only part of the support network in Georgia, said Maureen Kornowa, director of the North Gwinnett Cooperative Ministries in Buford.

Roughly 1,300 people per month come in for free bread and bakery goods that the co-op obtains from local supermarket donations. About 370 families each month also get free bags of food from the co-op, she said.

One of the co-op's clients is LaShawn Warren, 40, of Buford, who said she was working as a technical support analyst for a medical claims company when she was injured and had to stop working. She's been on food stamps since 2005. That help for herself and three children is crucial, she said. "There is no other way for me to make it."

With her eldest in college studying to be a biomedical engineer and her own plans to go back to work, she is hopeful about the long run. Still, her family doesn't eat in the long run; they eat every day.

"I am so grateful that the program was there when I needed it," Warren said.

The impact of Georgia's Recession

In fiscal year 2008, Georgia ranked 15 in the proportion of food stamp recipients. In fiscal year 2012, Georgia ranked 6th.

Here are the top 10 states ranked by percentage of people receiving food stamps.

State Number of recipients Percent of population

Mississippi 659,872 22.24%

New Mexico 438,252 21.28%

Oregon 815,221 21.28%

Louisiana 948,758 20.93%

Tennessee 1,316,810 20.75%

Georgia 1,912,839 19.75%

Kentucky 849,248 19.57%

Alabama 910,244 19.04%

Maine 252,860 19.04%

South Carolina 869,801 18.81%

Sources: Department of Agriculture, staff research

In metro Atlanta

The most recent data show the five core counties with more than 640,000 total recipients, according to Aaron Wiley of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food and Nutrition Service.

County On food stamps

Fulton 195,443

DeKalb 155,038

Gwinnett 114,558

Clayton 89,151

Cobb 88,111

Food stamp recipients in metro Atlanta spend about \$900 million a year on food.

About the food stamp program

Origins: Roots in the 1930s New Deal, then a pilot program in the 1960s.

It's not really "food stamps": Official name is the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.

It's not even stamps: The debit-like cards permit purchase of food only, not alcohol or cigarettes. There are no restrictions on what kinds of food.

Eligibility: Household gross income cannot exceed 130 percent of the poverty level. For a family of four, that's slightly less than \$2,000 per month, according to the state Department of Community Health.

Maximum benefit: \$668 a month for a family of four.

Average benefit: \$133 per person.

Average food bill: \$754 a month for a family of four in metro Atlanta.

Sources: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Policy Institute