

INCREASING NEED

One in seven in U.S. relying on food assistance

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WASHINGTON — Dorene is a certified teacher in Idaho, but the only job she can find is as a teaching assistant, which pays under \$11 an hour. That is considerably less than the \$45,000 that the average teacher in Idaho earns annually.

"We live paycheck to paycheck. I never thought I'd be in this situation," says Dorene, who asked that her full name not be used because her family doesn't know she has been getting food stamp benefits for her two young children and herself for a year.

Nationwide, one in seven Americans currently receives help from the government to put food on the table. All but 14 states saw double-digit spikes in the number of people getting food stamps over the one-year period that ended in November 2010. But Idaho had the largest one-year increase in the country: 28 percent, according to the latest government figures.

Idaho even edged ahead of Nevada, which has the country's highest unemployment rate at 14.5 percent. Idaho's 9.5 percent rate is closer to the national average of 9 percent. But Idaho's unemployment rate is three times higher than it was in 2007.

"People are simply running out of options," says Adrienne Evans, executive director of United Vision for Idaho, an advocacy group in Boise.

The record surge in Idaho is due to more than just the recession itself. Idaho has a history of being a somewhat welfare-resistant state. Before the recession began, only half the residents who were eligible actually came in and applied for food stamps. That number climbed to 55 percent in 2008, but it is still below the national average of more than 65 percent.

"When the recession hit, people who had been able to get by on their own could no longer be self-sufficient," says Tom Shanahan, a spokesman for the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare. "They needed help and they came in to apply, and continue to do so."

What is happening in Idaho is a stark reminder of the impact the weak economy is having on newly poor Americans and on cash-strapped states trying to help them. The federal stimulus package provided \$58.5 billion for food stamps, temporarily boosting monthly benefits until Nov. 1, 2013. Starting in April 2009, most four-person households received an \$80 increase in their monthly food stamp allotment.

Nationwide, the food stamp program helped 43.6 million people in November 2010 — the latest data available. About half of those recipients are children. Before the recession, the program was serving 26 million. The federal government pays the full cost of food stamp benefits, but splits the cost of administering the program with the states, which operate it. Technically, the program isn't called "food stamps" anymore — it was renamed as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, in 2008. Nor does the government actually give out paper stamps; Dorene and others receive their benefits on debit cards that

can only be used to purchase food.

The demand for food stamps is expected to remain high throughout the country as the unemployment rate hovers near 9 percent in 2011, gradually falling to 8.2 percent by late 2012 and reaching the "natural rate" of 5.3 percent only in 2016, according to the Congressional Budget Office.

Supporters say the program not only puts food on the table, but also helps stimulate the economy. Mark Zandi, chief economist at Moody's Analytics, figures that boosting food stamp payments by \$1 increases the gross domestic product by \$1.73. The USDA says the benefits are even higher, contending that every \$5 in new SNAP benefits generates as much as \$9 in economic activity.

But not everyone agrees. Before last fall's elections, former U.S. House Speaker Newt Gingrich and then-Speaker Nancy Pelosi got into a war of words about the effect of food stamps on the economy. Gingrich disputed the impact of the program. "Somehow, I don't understand how liberal math turns \$1 into \$1.79," he told Fox News.

Tad DeHaven, a budget analyst at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank, argues that the cost of food stamps has exploded and that the programs are highly susceptible to fraud. He says they should be cut, not expanded. "In fact," he says, "the entire federal welfare system needs to be devolved to the states, or preferably, private charity."