

# More Idahoans on food stamps than ever

**Groups gathered Monday at the Capitol to increase awareness of hunger, a growing issue in the state.**

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A record number of Idahoans are receiving food stamps, a sign that the state's economy still struggles.

The Idaho Department of Health and Welfare is processing 9,000 new food stamp applications each month, said Tom Shanahan, a department spokesman. More than 176,600 people are enrolled in the program - more than double the 2007 level.

"We're setting records every month," Shanahan said. "Food stamps are a good indicator of the number of people living near poverty. We're seeing the effects of layoffs and high unemployment."

Idahoans typically are reluctant to accept government aid, and the state has a relatively low rate of eligible people applying for aid. Around 60 percent of eligible people actually apply for aid, Shanahan said. A department official testified to lawmakers last week that 33 percent of people applying for help in the last two years had never applied before.

"Many of them never thought they would," Shanahan said.

The Idaho Interfaith Roundtable Against Hunger, a collection of groups seeking to help those with food needs, set up booths Monday at the Capitol.

The Idaho Foodbank said the need for food assistance increased 27 percent in 2009. More than 16 percent of Idaho children are "food insecure," according to the Foodbank.

"People that were donors before are the some of the ones in line now," said Kathy Gardner of the Idaho Hunger Relief Task Force.

In addition to increasing awareness, the groups want lawmakers not to delay the planned expansion of the state's income-tax credit for sales taxes paid on groceries. They also want Idaho to extend its suspension of the asset test for food stamps.

Thirty-one states exempt groceries from state sales taxes. Idaho does not, but returns some of the money to citizens through the credit. Gov. Butch Otter wants to carry out the next phase of the credit - basically an additional \$10 to individuals this year - but the program will cost Idaho nearly \$15 million, and that's money some legislators want to tap for other needs.

"We're supporting the continuation of the grocery tax credit to wean us off our tax on food," said Vivian Parrish, a member of the interfaith group who helped organize Monday's event.

Otter removed the asset test for food-stamp eligibility last June 1. The test required applicants to have less than \$2,000 in assets, including boats or ATVs. In a slumping economy, recently unemployed people who have such assets would have had to sell them far below value.

"Farmers out there have farm equipment worth more than \$2,000. They shouldn't have to sell their farm equipment to feed their kids," said Will Rainford, the legislative advocate for the Catholic Charities of Idaho. "Their kids go hungry while they don't have the ability to move their asset."

The Legislature must pass the asset-test extension to keep it in effect until May 31. A House subcommittee agreed last week. Pending action, the change remains in effect only until the end of the legislative session.

The anti-hunger groups want the extension to continue past May 31.

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