

Caseworker Shortage Delaying Food Stamp Applications.

By Alfred Lubrano INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

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More people need food stamps than ever before, but there are fewer state workers in Pennsylvania to process the claims; this may result in applicants missing out on benefits, according to anti-hunger advocates.

Research by the Greater Philadelphia Coalition Against Hunger shows that a major problem for people eligible for food stamps is communicating with their caseworkers at local offices of the state Department of Public Welfare.

In one recent test, the coalition learned that nearly two-thirds of all calls to caseworkers at a North Philadelphia service center never were answered.

"It's just god-awful," said Steveanna Wynn, who runs the SHARE Food Program in North Philadelphia, which allows anyone regardless of income to purchase food at discounted prices in exchange for volunteer time.

"Folks need services, and Department of Public Welfare workers don't have enough help. This is a nightmare. Both sides are ready to scream."

Department workers are on the front lines of the recession, charged with following strict laws and regulations regarding public assistance, all the while dealing with frightened and frustrated clients.

Many of these people, in turn, are newly unemployed and hurting, in need of public assistance for the first time in their lives, facing the reality that there may not be enough food for their children.

When these two groups interact, things can become testy and unpleasant, advocates say. And in many cases these days, clients find they cannot even reach their caseworkers.

"Things are now about as bad as I've ever seen them," said Richard Weishaupt, an expert in public benefits with Philadelphia's Community Legal Services. "People are feeling they're not well taken care of, workers are feeling burdened, and phone calls are going unanswered."

The Greater Philadelphia Coalition Against Hunger emphatically proved the last point.

In a report released this week, the coalition showed that from May 11 to June 5, its staff placed 377 calls for food-stamp clients to caseworkers at a North Philadelphia service center. Nearly 62 percent of the time, coalition callers were unable to contact anyone. They were connected to a recording instructing them to call back or heard nothing but endless ringing.

"This is a huge problem," said Rachel Meeks, the coalition's food-stamp campaign manager. "Customer service is becoming increasingly inaccessible as need rises."

Known as a "change center," the service facility was set up to allow food-stamp recipients to call in and learn the status of their cases. In addition, there are 15 county-assistance offices in Philadelphia that people use to apply for food stamps and other services.

With fewer workers able to take calls or process claims, more people face potentially dire consequences, advocates say.

"They can result in verification problems and missed deadlines during the application process, which can lead to unnecessary denials," Meeks said.

In a statement, the coalition blamed Gov. Rendell for not adequately staffing the Department of Public Welfare. "Gov. Rendell has ignored the problem," the statement said.

A spokesman for Rendell took exception, citing the state's budget crunch and saying: "The governor has been and continues to be determined to protect programs that affect the neediest Pennsylvanians. Any implication that he has failed to do so is misguided."

Defending caseworkers, Stacey Witalic, a department spokeswoman, said the work they did was "emotionally taxing." They do it, she added, "because they want to help people access their benefits and get on their feet."

In May, the number of Philadelphia residents receiving food stamps hit an all-time high of 365,503, a 10 percent increase over May 2008 and a 13 percent increase over May 2007, coalition figures show.

Meanwhile, the number of Department of Public Welfare county-assistance workers in Philadelphia (who deal with food stamps and other programs) has been reduced, mostly through attrition and a statewide hiring freeze, by about 24 percent since 2002, according to Joel Levin, a department supervisor and union official in Germantown.

Citing numbers from a different source, Witalic said the reduction was closer to 17 percent. There are about 1,700 workers in county-assistance offices in Philadelphia, Levin said. Of those, around 1,000 are caseworkers to assist those 365,000 people, Witalic said.

"The state is not filling these job vacancies because dollars are tight," said Cathleen Palm, coordinator of the Pennsylvania Welfare Coalition. "It's an untold story - not the draconian slashing of 1,000 workers but, little by little, not filling jobs."

Applying for food stamps is daunting, Meeks said. A person must have an interview with a caseworker, then provide up to 12 forms of supporting documentation, including pay stubs, rental agreements, and utility bills.

The legislature puts pressure on workers to screen out applicants who don't "deserve" benefits, Weishaupt said. Meanwhile, he added, people new to the system "expect more of a nurturing environment and don't realize how bureaucratized and technical all the rules and regulations are."

"So they're angry, which only causes the workers to get their backs up."

Given the exacting details of a complex vetting process, problems are bound to develop even in the best times. And these are not the best of times.

"I've been trying to get in touch with a caseworker for over 11/2 weeks," said Tangela Federick, 20, an unemployed home-health aide with two children living in West Philadelphia.

"I still don't know who it is. There's a total lack of communication."

Federick said her food stamps had been cut off because she couldn't produce a utility bill in her name. The problem is she lives with someone else, and the bill is in that person's name.

It seems like an easy fix, but given the current dynamics, Federick has gone two months without food stamps for her two children, both younger than 2.

Women who deal with caseworkers say they feel they are being stereotyped as "ghetto dropouts," said Federick, a high school graduate.

"Don't judge us. Don't judge me," said Joanna Cruz, 24, a South Philadelphia mother of girls ages 7 and 3. She works 38 hours a week for Dunkin' Donuts, earning \$7.15 an hour - not nearly enough to feed her family.

"I need the food stamps because I really need them," she said. "I'm trying to move forward."

Echoing what several other clients say, Myra Young, 40, of North Philadelphia, the mother of a 2-year-old son, said she often got the sense that caseworkers were difficult and acted as though "it's their own money they're giving you."

In truth, it's hard going for caseworkers, Levin said. "Morale sucks," he explained. "People are working through their breaks and still not getting their work done."

With the economy sputtering and resources strained, Steveanna Wynn of SHARE said: "It seems that no one has control over their own lives anymore."