

SOCIAL SERVICES

Straining the safety net

More Rhode Islanders getting food assistance; advocates worry about impact of federal cuts

By PAUL DAVIS
JOURNAL STAFF WRITER

PROVIDENCE — Advocates for the poor worry that federal cuts tied to the debt ceiling deal could hurt programs at a time when the need has never been greater.

While it's unclear what cuts Congress might make, economists say a reduction in spending will slow economic growth and spur more layoffs.

That, in turn, will fray an already-strained safety net, say local experts.

"The budget deal overall is terrible for low-income households," said Kathleen Gorman, director of the Feinstein Center for a Hunger Free America at the University of Rhode Island. "It's bad for the economy and it's only going to increase demand for programs."

Food stamp use is already at a record level.

In June, the number of Rhode Islanders getting help from the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP), the old food stamp program, soared to a record 163,608, from 87,235 in June 2008, a nearly 88 percent

SEE **ASSIST, A6** jump, according to new figures from the state Department of Human Services.

That's about 1 in 6 Rhode Islanders who rely on the federal program.

The number of users has grown for 36 consecutive

months and topped 100,000 in spring 2009.

In the last quarter, an average of 1,000 Rhode Islanders a month signed up for SNAP benefits.

Officials at the Rhode Island Community Food Bank have seen a similar spike.

In June, about 60,000 people got food at emergency pantries in the state, compared with 37,000 Rhode Islanders in June 2008, said CEO Andrew Schiff.

Nearly a fifth of them have no income, Schiff said. "This is the only way they can feed their family."

About 60 percent of those who get groceries from food pantries also rely on SNAP benefits.

The state's high jobless rate and a sluggish economy are partly to blame, said DHS spokesman Frederick Sneesby.

Also, outreach workers are signing up more Rhode Islanders who qualify for help, Sneesby said. And the state has streamlined the process.

The U.S. Senate Tuesday voted to raise the government's debt ceiling and cut trillions of dollars from its spending. As part of the deal, a bipartisan committee must find at least \$1.2 trillion more in deficit cuts spread over the next decade.

If the committee deadlocks or if the House or Senate rejects the panel's recommendations, it could trigger deep, across-the-board spending cuts in

defense and programs for the poor.

DHS officials won't speculate on what might happen, Sneesby said.

"Although we understand why there might be questions about reductions in federal spending for the SNAP program ... the fact is that the Department of Human Services has received no word of reductions in SNAP benefits," he said

Benefit and eligibility levels remain unchanged, he said.

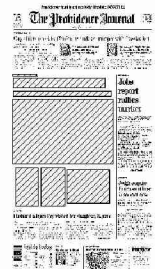
"Part of our mission is responding to changing circumstances," so DHS "will be ready to do so going forward as we've demonstrated in the past," Sneesby said.

Some agencies are already struggling with a recent cut in federal spending.

After receiving nearly \$1 million in federal money for emergency food and shelter programs in 2010, agencies this year will receive \$616,000 as a result of federal cutbacks.

The money — from the Department of Homeland Security's Federal Emergency Management Agency — last year helped local agencies provide 22,937 nights of shelter and over 400,000 meals to needy Rhode Islanders.

The cut "is going to have a huge impact," said Russell Partridge, program director at the WARM Center in Westerly, where officials



feed about 100 people a day.

WARM officials anticipated the cut, but the loss means the agency must make up the difference through donations and more fundraisers, said Partridge, who worries about other cuts. "There just isn't enough to go around."

At Amos House in Providence, officials rely on a small amount of federal food and shelter money for the operation of their kitchen, which serves free meals to the needy.

Still, the cut means the agency must depend on the community and donors for help.

"It's not as big a hit as it could have been," said Jessica Salter, director of development. "But any cut when times are tight has an impact on the services we provide."

Local agencies have yet to receive the reduced FEMA money because of federal delays, said United Way of Rhode Island spokesman **Chris Medici**. As a result, some agencies are now operating in the red, said Jim Ryczek, executive director of the Rhode Island Coalition for the Homeless.

Said Ryczek, "We're all in a position where we have fewer and fewer resources while facing a greater and greater need."

pdavis@projo.com / 277-7402

The number of Rhode Islanders getting money for food under SNAP — the old food stamp program — is surging.



THE PROVIDENCE JOURNAL / SANDOR BODO

David Izzi loads up a van at the Rhode Island Food Bank.



Volunteer Darnell Horton serves lunch at Amos House.

87,235
June 2008

107,891
June 2009

145,361
June 2010

163,608
June 2011



THE PROVIDENCE JOURNAL / MARY MURPHY

Catalina Vidal, left, serves lunch at Amos House in Providence with Tinisha Pona, Shaleeya Liberty and Daniel Cooper. Amos House relies on a small amount of federal food and shelter money for the operation of its kitchen, which serves free meals to the needy.



Shaleeya Liberty is participating in summer program through the Institute for the Study and Practice of Non-Violence and volunteers at Amos House three days a week.



THE PROVIDENCE JOURNAL / **MARY MURPHY**

Volunteers Catalina Vidal, left, and Tinisha Pona talk as they serve a free lunch to the needy at Amos House.