

News

AS MORE FALL ON HARD TIMES, HOLES IN THE SAFETY NET WIDEN

By **Zachary K. Johnson**

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Record Staff Writer

STOCKTON - As economic conditions have worsened, more people are turning to safety-net programs to weather the downturn, according to a report released Monday.

But the same economic conditions also have caused a reduction in funding for programs, which along with flat state funding for the past eight years has contributed to an annual shortfall to social services programs approaching \$2 billion a year, according to a report released by the County Welfare Directors Association of California and the California State Association of Counties.

This is happening when increases in these types of services could provide a much needed boost to ailing local economies, the report continues, noting that every dollar spent on human services translates to \$1.32 of economic activity.

"Spending can help suffering and prop up an ailing economy in the meantime," said Frank Mecca, executive director of the Welfare Directors Association. As more and more people lose their jobs, demand has increased dramatically, he said. "These are year-to-year increases of the magnitude we've never seen before."

From September 2007 to September 2008, caseloads in California increased 15.47 percent for food stamps, 5.89 percent for welfare programs for families, 5.24 percent for health services for the low-income and 14.94 percent for cash assistance for those not eligible for state or federal aid, according to the report.

State and federal dollars spent on social programs stay in the local economy, said Roger Dickinson, a member of the Sacramento County Board of Supervisors and the CSAC board of directors.

The people now asking for help have more education, a more stable work history and an increased likelihood of being two-parent families, he said.

And that seems to be the case in San Joaquin County, based on perceptions of county employees, county Human Services Director Joe Chelli said.

"The assistance we provide not only helps families," he said, explaining that the money recipients spend on groceries, clothes and other needs has a multiplying effect on the economy.

Despite the growing need, human services have been hit by a decline in state spending, said Jon Haveman, a founding partner of Beacon Economics, which produced economic findings highlighted in the report.

Cuts in social services can resurface later as increased costs in hospitals, courtrooms and drug-treatment programs, he said.

"You can pay for it now, or you can pay for it later."

Contact reporter Zachary K. Johnson at (209) 546-8258 or zjohnson@recordnet.com.

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