

# Isle food stamp use rises

## The state eased rules to let more people qualify for federal nutrition assistance

By Alan Yonan Jr.

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The number of Hawaii residents signing up for food stamps increased at a faster pace than the national average last year as state officials expanded eligibility for the program to help people suffering from the economic slowdown.

Data released recently by the U.S. Department of Agriculture showed that 156,355 Hawaii residents were enrolled in the federally funded program in December, up 16.7 percent from the same month a year earlier. The increase was the 13th largest among the 50 states and the District of Columbia. Nationally, the number of people on food stamps under the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program rose 13.1 percent to 44 million in December from a year earlier.

The increased participation in Hawaii was due to a combination of factors, including a push last year by the state Department of Human Services to get more people into the program as well as the continuing effects of the recession, officials said.

"We started doing more outreach last year in the community, working with our contacts who helped us by letting people know about the SNAP program," said Toni Schwartz, DHS spokeswoman.

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The average monthly benefit for Hawaii residents for fiscal year 2010 under the SNAP program was \$218.22, the highest of any state, according to the USDA.

The depth and duration of the latest economic downturn has caused many families to apply for food stamps and other government programs that would have never considered doing so in the past, said Connie Mitchell, executive director of the Institute for Human Services.

"We do see a different segment of the community getting help," said Mitchell, who oversees an agency that provides assistance to a broad group of people from the homeless to victims of domestic abuse to families that are simply struggling financially.

"It feels like there has been some stabilization, but we still see people who are having a very hard time finding work. There's been more temporary work, but what we need is jobs that pay a living wage."

Food stamp benefits are paid with federal funds, while the cost to administer the program is split evenly between the state and federal governments. The share of Hawaii's population using food stamps nearly doubled from 6.7 percent in 2006 to 12.1 percent at the end of 2010. The 12.1 percent participation rate was the 14th highest out of the 50 states and the District of Columbia.

To learn more about the food stamp program and other services provided by the Department of Human Services, visit [hawaii.gov/dhs/self-sufficiency/benefit](http://hawaii.gov/dhs/self-sufficiency/benefit).

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