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Welfare Rolls Grow in City, but Increase Is Modest

By JULIE BOSMAN

As the number of [New Yorkers applying for food stamps](#), enrolling in [Medicaid](#) and [checking into homeless shelters](#) climbed last year, the welfare rolls presented something of a riddle: they continued to fall.

But last month, nearly 355,000 people in the city received welfare payments, a 4 percent increase over the year before, according to city officials, who predict that if the economy does not recover, the growth will continue for at least 18 months.

City welfare officials and advocates for the poor disagree on why it took so long for the rolls to grow — the rise began in the summer — but the trend is a reflection of the national welfare reform of the 1990s, which also may be a factor in why the growth has been so slow. Even with the increases, the caseloads are still 23 percent lower than when Mayor [Michael R. Bloomberg](#) took office in 2002 and are just a third of the number at the enrollment peak in 1995.

The most significant of those reforms put a five-year lifetime limit on eligibility and required most recipients to look for work or enter job training. Welfare recipients who have reached the five-year limit can sign up for a program called [Safety Net Assistance](#), whose costs are shouldered by the city and state. More than 90,000 of the city's welfare recipients are in the Safety Net program, which comes with work requirements but no time limit. At least 29,600 people have signed up for welfare in 2009 for the first time.

Meanwhile, participation in the federally subsidized food stamp program and Medicaid has risen sharply. More than 2.8 million people in New York are enrolled in Medicaid, and more than 1.6 million receive food stamps, a 21.9 percent increase over last year.

Some advocates for the poor said they were relieved to see even a modest increase in the welfare rolls.

“It should be considered a positive thing and a natural thing as we start to head into a 10 percent overall unemployment rate in New York,” said David R. Jones, the president and chief executive of the [Community Service Society](#), one of the city's oldest social services agencies for low-income people. “If unemployment rates continue to spiral upward in New York, and you didn't see an increase in welfare, something would be seriously wrong. That would mean that we weren't getting people on relief quickly enough.”

Others who work with the poor question whether the welfare program is reaching enough people who are in need, especially the newly unemployed.

“For me, the most significant point might be not so much that welfare has finally been responsive to the increased need of low-income New Yorkers, but why it has been relatively so unresponsive,” said Don Friedman, a managing lawyer for the [Empire Justice Center](#), a legal advocacy group.

Robert Doar, the commissioner of the city's [Human Resources Administration](#), said he had anticipated a slight increase in caseloads, and attributed it in part to the struggling economy. He also suggested that the recent increase in the basic welfare check — the first in 19 years — might have encouraged some recipients to enroll. (For a family of four, the subsidy rose to \$413.70 a month, from \$375.70.)

Some of the new welfare recipients had signed up for food stamps and unemployment benefits but were having trouble finding jobs, Mr. Doar said. “The lag is because people don’t turn to cash welfare until they’re really down to the end of the line,” he said.

It is much simpler to receive food stamps than cash assistance. The Bloomberg administration has streamlined the process for applying and worked with community groups to enroll participants, and it has allowed many people to mail in applications, be interviewed over the phone and renew their eligibility for food stamps less frequently.

The application process for cash assistance, however, has not changed, and the federal work requirements are still in place. Applicants are also required to submit to a home visit that officials say is intended to detect fraud.

Many cash assistance recipients balk at the work rules, which are strictly enforced. Evelyn Melenz, a mother of two from East New York, Brooklyn, said she received food stamps but had heard that staying on welfare was difficult.

“It used to be easier to go on cash assistance,” she said as she left a food stamp office in Brooklyn this month. “You didn’t have to go to work, you didn’t have to report every day to an office and sign in and sign out. Now, if you don’t go to those group job meetings in the mornings, they shut down your whole welfare case. So that’s why I just get food stamps.”

Bich Ha Pham, the director of policy, advocacy and research for the [Federation of Protestant Welfare Agencies](#), said she frequently heard from low-income people who were frustrated by the long waits at welfare offices, which are run by the Human Resources Administration.

At one office on Hoyt Street in Downtown Brooklyn where applications for cash assistance, food stamps and other social services are processed, the line routinely stretches around the corner.

Lillian Hillard waited outside the office the other day, [smoking](#) a cigarette and pacing in frustration.

Ms. Hillard, 48, who lives with her mother and two teenage children in the Brownsville section of Brooklyn, said she had been out of work for more than two years. She receives food stamp benefits totaling \$327 a month and has not been on welfare in years, but she recently submitted an application to get back on cash assistance. Ms. Hilliard said she was told it would take 45 days for her welfare application to be processed.

“I didn’t want to do it,” she said. “But my mother’s going to kick us all out soon, and then we’re going to have to go to the shelter.”