

## Food stamps: Millions of Americans wait months as applications pile up

Associated Press By Associated Press

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In this May 12, 2010 photo, Domitila Lara, left, helps her children Ariana, center, and Eduardo, right, with their homework in San Diego. Lara, 44, applied for food stamps in San Diego in late 2008 after her husband lost his job in construction. For more than three months, Lara called and waited in line repeatedly for food stamps. Paperwork was lost. She got conflicting instructions on how to fill out forms. The family used her husband's unemployment checks to cover the mortgage on their house but worried about how to feed their younger children. More than 50 percent of food stamp applications were delayed in San Diego County in fiscal year 2009.

JUSTIN JUOZAPAVICIUS, and MICHELLE ROBERTS,  
Associated Press Writers

SAN ANTONIO, Texas - When Amanda Vaca's husband lost his job, the couple took stock of their finances and drew a startling conclusion: They could not afford to feed their four young children.

So Vaca filled out an application for food stamps. Then, the wait began. A month passed, then two. In some weeks, the food simply ran out.

"There was several occasions where I didn't have breakfast to cook them or all there was was noodles," said Vaca, a customer-service representative in Fort Worth who got laid off shortly after her husband. They waited three months for assistance.

The recession has landed millions of hungry families in similar straits, forcing them to endure long waits for

help buying basic groceries. A review by The Associated Press found that dozens of food-stamp programs in 39 states left at least a quarter of applicants waiting weeks or months for food aid, some in areas that were not particularly hard hit by the economic downturn.

Federal law requires applications for food stamps to be reviewed within 30 days of being filed, and even faster for the poorest families. Failure to do so can subject agencies to federal sanctions and lawsuits, but individual families are largely at the mercy of their local administrators.

### Excuses don't work with kids

Among the excuses for the delays were overburdened bureaucracies, staff shortages or program rules. But that makes little difference to parents with hungry children.

"It got to that point where there was nothing. It was scary. It was very, very stressful," Vaca said. "We went to churches to get food, food banks or whatever. I was always searching for places to get food."

In fiscal 2009, Texas left about a third of its applicants waiting more than 30 days for food assistance, the worst among

states examined by the AP, even though Texas was spared the brunt of the recession.

In Rhode Island, nearly a quarter of new applications were delayed. In Florida, Colorado and Nevada, about one-fifth of applications were processed late.

In the months since those problems arose, some agencies have improved their processing systems, but application delays persist in many places.

Vaca spent days pleading by phone and in person for someone to look at her application. At one point, a frazzled office manager took her to a back room to show her piles of unprocessed applications. Her family eventually was approved for food stamps and received retroactive benefits for the months they were waiting.

## 40 million get food assistance

A record 40 million people -- one in eight Americans -- now rely on Supplemental Nutrition Assistance, the official name of the modern food stamp program, which began in 1961. The number of participating households increased by one-fifth in fiscal 2009, and many states' food-stamp rolls grew by a third or more.

"Never in our lifetimes have these programs been so urgently needed," said Kevin Cancannon, undersecretary of the Department of Agriculture, which oversees food stamps.

The government uses a complicated formula for determining eligibility, but a family of four must earn less than \$2,389 per month. The federal government funds the full cost of benefits and half the administrative costs, a total of \$53.77 billion in fiscal 2009. The average monthly payout is \$275 per household.

Food stamp payments work much like a debit card at grocery stores and some farmers' markets. The money is good for groceries such as produce, meat, dairy and bread products, along with snack foods and nonalcoholic drinks. The money cannot be used for alcohol or household goods like toilet paper or pet food.

## States add extra eligibility requirements

State and local governments, though they pay only a small percentage of the overall program costs, administer the aid and are allowed to add extra eligibility requirements. Some have added things like fingerprints or notarized documents as fraud-prevention measures, though the effectiveness of such requirements has been debated.

Cancannon said some of those rules create additional hurdles that needlessly slow aid to needy families.

To look at the effect of the recession on the program, the AP gathered monthly numbers of new applications processed and those that took longer than 30 days from every county or region within each state for fiscal year 2009, the first full fiscal year of the recession.

Not every state could provide the data requested by the AP, either because of outdated computer systems or because they do not track the number of applications processed. But 39 states and Washington, D.C., provided overall counts, and 36 states had county or regional data.

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Only one state, Indiana, refused to provide any answers on timeliness despite repeated phone and public records requests.

Cancannon said in an interview with the AP that Indiana is "grossly behind" in processing food stamps after a botched effort to turn the program over to IBM Corp.

In Texas, nearly 32 percent of new applications statewide took longer than 30 days to process in fiscal 2009. Some of the delay was caused by new applications after Hurricane Ike hit in fall 2008, but lengthy delays were reported in areas far from the Gulf Coast and long after the storm.

Jamie Moore, a 19-year-old college student, said she went with her mother last summer to a food-stamp office in Houston while their family's application languished.

"I understand they say government is slow, but people are starving," she said.

Colorado's Mesa and Jefferson counties were some of the worst in the AP's review of more than 1,800 counties or groups of counties where applications are tracked together. About 44 percent of applications in those two counties took longer than the 30 days allowed. The same was true around Elko County in northeast Nevada.

Liz McDonough, a spokeswoman for Colorado's Department of Human Services, said demand is unprecedented.

"Colorado struggles with timeliness. We'll grant that, but we are putting every effort forth," she said.

Tracey Stewart of the Colorado Center on Law and Policy blamed the state's cumbersome application process.

"It takes three hours to enter an application, and the case manager is probably not seeing more than three clients a day," she said.

San Diego County in California fared even worse. More than 50 percent of its applications were delayed. By contrast, recession-battered Los Angeles County processed all but about 7 percent of applications on time.

Domitila Lara, 44, applied in San Diego in late 2008 after her husband lost his job in construction.

## **Paperwork lost, then conflicting instructions**

For more than three months, she called and waited in line repeatedly. Paperwork was lost. She got conflicting instructions on how to fill out forms. The family used her husband's unemployment checks to cover the mortgage on their house but worried about how to feed their younger children.

"The social worker, she never calls me back. I keep calling. I need a response," Lara said.

Nationally, at least 16 million applications poured into food stamp offices during fiscal 2009, and most were processed within 30 days.

About half of the states examined by the AP reviewed 90 percent or more of new applications on time.

Stacy Dean, director of food assistance policy at the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, a liberal think tank, said the overall system has helped people during the downturn, but there are gaps.

"There have been many cases where families and seniors have had to wait far too long," she said. "If your economic circumstances are equally dire, whether you live in Oregon or California or Mississippi, you're supposed to have access to benefits in the same amount of time."

The USDA's Food and Nutrition Service has been pushing state and local administrators to speed processing. The agency has urged poor performers to make changes to specific policies and processes "that really harm the applicant at their worst time, at their most vulnerable time," Cancannon said.

"We've talked about this all the way up the White House. We want program integrity, but we want to make sure that you're providing access to people," he said.

After receiving a reprimand from the federal government, the Texas Health and Human Services Commission hired an additional 850 caseworkers, and it pulled employees off other assignments to clear out thousands of backlogged applications.

"We threw everything at it, and that's a short-term fix. Now we have to redesign systems," commission spokeswoman Stephanie Goodman said.

In San Diego, Dale Fleming of the Health and Human Services Division said the county has reconfigured its case-management process and upgraded its computer system. Timeliness rates are improving, she said.

But Dean said officials and advocates are still trying to find ways to ensure that needy families get fast help.

"A mom with a hungry baby thinks right now is timely," she said. "It's crucial that the program get benefits out quickly."

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Juozapavicius reported from Tulsa, Okla.

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