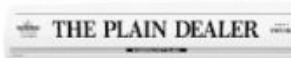




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Working families earn more food stamps

[Final Edition]

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If you want to find the people behind the country's big jump in food stamps, you have to go to work.

That's where they are.

The number of American households bringing in a paycheck and collecting food stamps has risen from 19 percent to 29 percent in recent years, according to data from the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

The same is true in Ohio and Cuyahoga County.

Working families collecting food stamps more than doubled in the state between 2000 and 2006.

"It's the restructuring of our economy," says Joseph Gauntner, director of Cuyahoga County's Employment & Family Services, "the proverbial steelworker who now cleans offices and works at McDonald's."

Ohio lost another 17,000 manufacturing jobs in 2006. The same year, the state added 21,000 service jobs. Many Americans now hold those lower-paying jobs.

"We're seeing a kind of hollowing out of middle-class jobs," says Margy Waller, director of The Mobility Agenda in Washington, D.C., which conducts research on low-wage work. "We're just about to release a report that will show that about one in three jobs pays under \$10 an hour."

To qualify for the government's nutrition program, you generally cannot earn more than 130 percent of the federal poverty level.

In 2007, a family of four earning \$26,845 or less would be eligible.

Another explanation for the increased use of food stamps, say those in and outside the system, is better advertising.

"Outreach has been increased to make sure people know what their benefits are," says Dennis Evans, spokesman for the Ohio Department of Job & Family Services.

"More people are aware that food stamps are available."

More workers are, too, because some employers -- T.J. Maxx among them -- now notify employees who qualify, USDA officials say.

Other administrative changes also have helped.

Food stamp recipients can own a more valuable car than they could a few years ago and the debit-like card that replaced the paper stamps has removed at least some of the program's stigma.

And, at least in Ohio, the increase in minimum wage isn't helping much.

January's hike -- from \$5.15 to \$6.85 an hour -- doesn't necessarily lift a family off food stamps.

As Gauntner explains, a single parent with two children earning the new minimum wage still, in most cases, qualifies.

"Do I think it's good for people to get more income? Yeah," Gauntner says. "Is it going to take them off the food-stamp program? No."

So what's the solution?

Short-term, local poverty advocates suggest a state income tax credit that would put more money in the pockets of the working poor.

"But at the end of the day," Gauntner says, "the answer is jobs."

Many agree.

"We need to invest in education, and we need to find some ways to bring some better jobs to Ohio," says Amy Hanauer, executive director of the nonprofit research group Policy Matters Ohio.

"And we should hold employers to higher standards when we can. We have a tendency in this country to throw up our hands and act as if there's nothing we can do about that."

Productivity and corporate earnings are up, Hanauer says, and businesses can afford to pay people enough to keep them out of poverty.

"I think this is a matter of insisting on standards," she says, "and having the will to do something about it."

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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