



## Local use of food stamps doubles



Written by

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The number of residents receiving **food** stamps in Marathon and Lincoln counties nearly doubled during the last four years as the recession forced more people into poverty and stretched family paychecks.

In the first six months of 2011, a monthly average of 14,784 Marathon County residents received food stamps, up from 7,936 in 2007. Almost 3,700 Lincoln County residents used the program in the same time frame, up from 1,587 in 2007.

Tammy Beranek, a 44-year-old Wausau resident who has used the program for three years, said it allowed her to make ends meet when she was diagnosed with epilepsy and couldn't continue **working** as a housekeeper.

"I honestly don't know what we would do without it," said Beranek, who lives with her 15-year-old daughter. "I'm a firm believer in God, but you can't rely on him for those needs."

The food stamp program -- known as

FoodShare in Wisconsin -- acts as a supplement for low-income individuals and families to buy groceries, but is not intended to cover their entire food budget. Eligibility for FoodShare is based on the level of **income** for an individual or family, and the monthly amount is determined by a formula that evaluates income and the cost of child care and shelter.

Blind, disabled and elderly people might receive additional compensation for medical costs.

At 94 percent, growth of food stamp use in Marathon and Lincoln counties is higher than the statewide increase of 87 percent during the same time period, according to a July study released by the Urban Institute. The growth reflects a wider national trend, the result of a lingering sluggish economy and procedural changes in several states that encouraged more individuals and **families** to apply for food assistance.

Pamela Loprest, a senior researcher with the Washington, D.C.-based Urban

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Institute, said the increase in food stamp use in Wisconsin and every other state indicates the real impact of high unemployment.

"Unemployment numbers, of course, tell us a lot," Loprest said. "But to get a sense of how much families are hurting, you can look at these huge increases in what is essentially public assistance for food."

Stephanie Smiley, communications director for the Wisconsin Department of Health Services, said a procedural change partially helped to boost the enrollment numbers. Applicants for Badgercare Plus health care assistance now are prompted to apply for FoodShare if they qualify.

"That increase still is telling," she said. "We know our unemployment numbers are up, we know the number of people looking for assistance with food and health care is up. The combination (indicates) how people are doing."

The local increase in FoodShare applicants and recipients did force Marathon County's Social Services Department to make adjustments, requiring more staff members to evaluate applications and allow eligible people to begin receiving aid. Jane Huebsch, who manages the county's FoodShare service program, said applications peaked in 2010.

"There's been a rise in the cost of groceries, gas, insurance; pretty much anything," Huebsch said. "People are finding it hard to make ends meet even though they may be working."

Beranek uses her Wisconsin Quest card for groceries at the nonprofit SHARE location in Wausau, part of a discount grocery service that serves Wisconsin and other parts of the Midwest.

"It's hard to make a limited **budget** stretch," Beranek said. "They have the best deals, especially on meats and other products I couldn't afford in a grocery store."

SHARE is a food-buying club that accepts orders from customers, then buys items in bulk to pass on lower prices. The nonprofit has seen an increase in customers using food stamps in Wisconsin that mirrors state and county statistics.

In 2007, less than 7 percent of the nonprofit's grocery sales came from food stamp users. So far this year, about 14 percent of sales were to food stamp users.

"I infer from those numbers that people are looking for alternate ways to meet their everyday expenses," SHARE Executive Director Paulette Flynn said.

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The green Wisconsin Quest card, which functions much like a bank debit card, can't be used for alcohol or inedible items, including cigarettes. Huebsch said most grocery store registers alert a cashier when an unapproved item is mixed in with a food stamp user's acceptable purchases.

Beranek said she prefers the card to coupons she used to see others use and frequently hears the same opinion from other FoodShare recipients. But she's happy to have the help in any form.

"I'd hope that we don't end up losing it because of the economy," she said. "We need it."

**DO YOU QUALIFY?**

People might qualify for Wisconsin FoodShare assistance if their monthly net income (take-home pay) is at or below the following figures for each family size:

No. of people Income

1	\$903
2	\$1,215
3	\$1,526
4	\$1,838
5	\$2,150
6	\$2,461
7	\$2,773
8	\$3,085
9	\$3,397
10	\$3,709

For each additional person, add \$312. For more specific information or to see if you qualify, go to [access.wis.gov](http://access.wis.gov).

Source: Wisconsin Department of Health Services

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