**Rise in FoodShare another indicator of pandemic’s toll**

*By Wisconsin Policy Forum*

The number of Wisconsin FoodShare recipients grew to 724,200 in August, its highest point yet this year and an increase of more than 120,000 people since March, when the COVID-19 crisis began in the U.S. The number of households enrolled in the program now totals 378,200, an increase of 66,000 (21%) over last year — reversing a longstanding trend of declining program usage since 2013.

FoodShare is the state program that distributes federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits, once called “food stamps.” To qualify for the program, recipients must earn below $26,200 for a family of four or $12,760 for an individual.

The rising FoodShare recipient levels speak to the hardship faced by families across the state due to COVID-19. Forty of the state’s 72 counties and two tribes saw an increase of 20% or more in FoodShare recipients since August 2019. Milwaukee County had 257,000 participants (27% of its population), an increase of 33,000 individuals (15%) over 2019.

The August rise in FoodShare participants, coming after a slight decline last July, could be due to the expiration of the $600 federal unemployment benefit, which may have reduced incomes enough to qualify more people for SNAP benefits. Workers returning to their jobs at reduced hours and pay may be another reason for the increase in recipients. The state has since been approved for an additional $300 in weekly federal unemployment benefits but it is not clear for how long or whether those benefits will count toward FoodShare income limits.

Though a decline in unemployment may eventually bring FoodShare numbers back down, in the short term the state could see even higher numbers of recipients as CARES Act and other federal benefits run out. Policymakers will need to consider all of these trends in their ongoing responses to the pandemic as they balance fiscal restraint with the needs of vulnerable citizens.

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