

Ohio poor face \$80 million loss

Cuts in services aggravated by high demand, county officials say

Thursday, September 25, 2008 3:28 AM

By [Barbara Carmen](#)

THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

## DispatchPolitics

- [DispatchPolitics.com](#)  
Complete coverage of the election and Ohio politics
- [The Road to Washington](#)  
News and notes about the campaigns of candidates seeking federal offices
- [The Daily Briefing](#)  
The Dispatch's public affairs team sates the appetites of political junkies with bite-sized portions of the news and what's behind it.
- [Buckeye Forum](#)  
Veteran political reporters examine Ohio politics in this weekly podcast.



Nearly \$80 million in cuts to Ohio programs that serve the poor couldn't have come at a worse time, county human services directors said yesterday.

Demand for services is rising as the economy tanks, the foreclosure crisis continues and more immigrants arrive for resettlement.

"We are seeing record numbers of poor, the worst that I have seen in nearly 30 years in the field. We are seeing people who are hungry," said Michael Orlando, director of Job and Family Services in Fairfield County.

Like other county directors, he's waiting for specifics from the state to determine cuts he'll have to make. But he predicts it will be rough.

"This is a crisis or train wreck waiting to happen with the poverty and hunger that we are seeing in our communities," Orlando said.

His agency, which serves about 20,000 people a year, gets 250 new applicants each month for food stamps and Medicaid.

Most are from working families or are elderly residents who have worked their entire lives, Orlando said.

The budget cuts coming down from the state mean "there is no way to avoid significant reduction in serving the customers who come through the door," he said.

The Ohio Department of Job and Family Services made the cuts, including millions of dollars for a welfare program, to comply with a request by Gov. Ted Strickland to pare 4.75 percent from most agencies' budgets.

The state faces a projected budget deficit of \$540 million in the final year of its two-year, \$52 billion budget.

Individual county agencies must decide how to rework their budgets.

"These are difficult decisions that need to be made in order to meet current budget conditions," Job and Family Services spokesman Dennis Evans said.

The bad economy that has battered the state's budget, prompting the latest round of cuts, also drains grants that local governments rely on to help the surge of struggling families.

It's a vicious cycle, said Lance Porter, a spokesman for Franklin County's Job and Family Services. That agency serves about 24,000 people.

"We went through similar times like this before, maybe eight or nine years ago," Porter said. "When times are better, there are more programs, more services available."

Government agencies won't be the only ones that feel the pinch. Franklin County contracts with small businesses, large companies, universities and nonprofit groups to provide services to the poor.

Likely, most services will remain, but they'll be scaled back. Clients will wait longer for services or have fewer places to go for help such as job training, crisis counseling or free summer camps for kids.

The state provides about 10 percent of Franklin County's annual \$200 million budget for human services. The county chips in just under \$7 million a year, and federal grants cover the rest.

Rojanne Woodward, director of Pickaway County Job and Family Services, already has cut her agency's spending by about \$900,000, or 10 percent, this year because of a cash crunch. Seven positions were not filled.

"I don't know where the cuts are going to come, but it's going to hurt services to the public," Woodward said.

Demand for services is high with the poor economy; 2,422 Pickaway County households received food stamps in August, the highest number in three years, she said.

John Fisher, director of Licking County Job and Family Services, will meet with county commissioners today to discuss ways to keep clients from feeling the hit. But with the economy and the county still picking up the pieces from last week's windstorm, this couldn't have come at a worse time, he said.

The Ohio Department of Job and Family Services also intends to cut back on a prescription drug program for the poor and seniors, money to detect Medicaid fraud, and funds to administer the state's child support program.

Fisher said it's important to realize that for every dollar the department loses in local money, it loses an equal amount of federal money.

"We'll see people in this community who desperately need these services, and who qualify for these services, not receive them in a timely fashion," he said.

Earlier this year, Strickland announced a previous round of cuts that totaled \$733 million. Job and Family Services was able to largely avoid making cuts that would have a direct impact on services.

Strickland ordered that two of the department's programs be protected from budget cuts -- the \$9.3 billion the state sets aside to provide Medicaid to low-income Ohioans until receiving a federal reimbursement, and \$25 million for disability assistance.

Dispatch reporters Mary Beth Lane, Randy Ludlow and Josh Jarman and the Associated Press contributed to this story.

[bcarmen@dispatch.com](mailto:bcarmen@dispatch.com)