

NEW REPORT

282,000 Franklin County children relying on food stamps

Percentage has doubled in seven years

Friday, January 30, 2009 9:32 PM

BY RITA PRICE

THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

Spending 15 months in the mountains of Afghanistan is not an easy thing. Brian Sturgill fought. He saw people die. He missed the birth of his daughter.

Sturgill always took his duties in stride, but now he's reminding himself that his military service was a sacrifice, too.

"That's the only way I can do this and sleep at night," he said.

Sturgill had to ask for food stamps this week so he could feed his wife and child.

He felt embarrassed. But the 26-year-old father is far from unusual: One of every four Franklin County children is part of a family that receives food stamps, according to a report from the Children's Defense Fund-Ohio and state figures released this week.

The percentage has doubled in the past seven years, going from about 14 percent of all children under 18 in 2001 to about 28 percent by the end of 2008. That is approximately 282,000 children.

The rate of increase has been just as high or higher in the six contiguous counties.

"Participation in these programs is an indicator of how much people are struggling," said Barbara Turpin of the Children's Defense Fund-Ohio.

The soaring caseloads also reflect higher-than-ever numbers of new and working recipients. "From June to December, we've seen a 30percent increase in our new families," said Laura Holton of the Fairfield County Department of Job and Family Services. "That is huge."

States expect help for their food-stamp programs to eventually flow through President Barack Obama's stimulus package. Studies generally show that food-stamp increases help boost the economy.

"People spend it," Holton said. "And they spend it locally."

Sturgill can vouch for that. He had to apply for food stamps -- formally known as the Ohio Food

Assistance Program -- on an expedited basis. That category is for people who need immediate help.

"We have absolutely no income," said Sturgill, who was laid off from his civilian job with the Ohio National Guard just before Christmas. "I've applied for unemployment, but I haven't seen a check yet."

An emergency supply of food stamps often can be issued within three days, officials said. The normal process takes about a month.

Either way, a face-to-face interview and many forms are required. Caseworkers also must meet and recertify recipients every six months.

Sturgill said he was disappointed when it took a week to meet with a caseworker. "I was kind of bummed, but I understand," he said. "It's busy."

After four years of active duty in the Army, Sturgill came home in 2007. A steady job proved more elusive than he imagined. "I've applied for so many," he said.

He and his wife, Christiane, sought food stamps once during the summer, but the Guard job came through and he didn't think he would need help again. "I was looking at houses and everything," he said.

Now his hopes rest on a truck-driving school that he'll begin attending soon. His 2-year-old daughter is thriving, and Sturgill and his wife try to be optimistic.

Afghanistan is fading into the background. So are the welcome feelings of invincibility that carried him through his tour.

"You kind of feel like you're not where you're supposed to be," he said. "You're a man and you want to take care of your family. But I guess this is a good lesson in humility."

rprice@dispatch.com

©2009, The Columbus Dispatch, Reproduction prohibited