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Half of those eligible not getting food stamps

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Half of the nation's eligible poor aren't getting the food stamps to which they're entitled, a study released Tuesday said.

In the study, conducted by the National Priorities Project, a nonprofit and nonpartisan research group that examines the local impact of federal budget policies, the District of Columbia had the highest participation rate in 2004, at 71.8 percent, while Missouri ranked first among the 50 states in getting food stamps to its low-income residents.

Nevada ranked last among states, with 32 percent of its eligible residents getting food stamps. California ranked 14th at 44.2 percent.

"We've got over 35 million people in this country struggling to get enough food to eat, and 50 percent of all low-income people are not receiving the benefit that is intended to alleviate this food insecurity," said Greg Speeter, the project's executive director. "While the food-stamp program provides a vital service, clearly too many people are still going without."

The authors cited many reasons for the disparities, including the stigma of government benefits, eligibility rules and lack of information about the benefits.

In Monterey County, it's unclear exactly how many eligible residents aren't getting stamps, but it's a "sizeable section of the population," said Sam Trevino, community relations manager for the Department of Social and Employment Services.

"We're talking about legal residents who are maybe just preoccupied or bogged down in dealing with their own lives and day-to-day issues," Trevino said. "Maybe there is some stigma. Maybe there is some shame."

In July, 20,277 people received food stamps in the county, a number that's been steady for the past few years, largely because the county's population isn't growing that much, he said.

To qualify for food stamps, a household's annual income must be 130 percent below the federal poverty level, Trevino said. For example, a four-person household in Monterey County would earn a monthly income of \$2,167. A six-person household would earn \$2,904 during the same period, he said.

And even if someone earns more than that amount, certain allowances are factored into the equation when people apply for food stamps that may make them eligible, Trevino said.

"You can own a car. You can even own a home that you live in. Hard times affect everybody," he said.

Trevino said county employees are often surprised when talking to potentially-eligible residents that they are not aware of the program. So social workers do outreach, knocking on doors, walking the street and attending community events and neighborhood centers.

"People have a hesitancy to go to a large public government agency," he said.

The department is starting a new outreach program called MC Choice, which is focused on getting out information about Medi-Cal to people who may be eligible. As part of the program, information about food stamps will also be disseminated.

"Usually, if you are eligible for one, you are eligible for the other," Trevino said.

The food-stamp program, founded in 1964 and run by the Department of Agriculture, is the largest of the federal government's food and **◀nutrition▶ ◀programs▶**. In 2004, the program cost \$28.6 billion, or 1.2 percent of total federal spending, and served 23.2 million people, the study said.

In examining state participation rates, the authors of the study focused on county data for 2004, finding wide differences.

The study found that a significant number of counties, 13.2 percent, had below-average percentages of low-income people participating in the program, even though they had above-average poverty rates.

Nearly all of the states followed a national trend of increasing the number and percentage of low-income people participating in the food-stamp program in recent years. The study said that much of the increase was the result of changes in eligibility rules that took effect in 2002. And since 2004, all states are now using electronic benefits transfer systems, which allow food-stamp beneficiaries to appear to be using debit cards.

Only three states -- Hawaii, Rhode Island and Connecticut -- had decreases in the proportion of low-income people participating in the program between 2000 and 2004.