

Berks County Community Snapshot



United Way of Berks County

This report is provided by United Way of Berks County and designed to provide regular updates to the Berks County community about the changing nature of local economic conditions and resulting human service needs. It will be published on a quarterly basis, and we encourage its distribution to anyone who may have an interest.

Summer 2009

Food Insecurity: Need for Food Still High Across Berks County

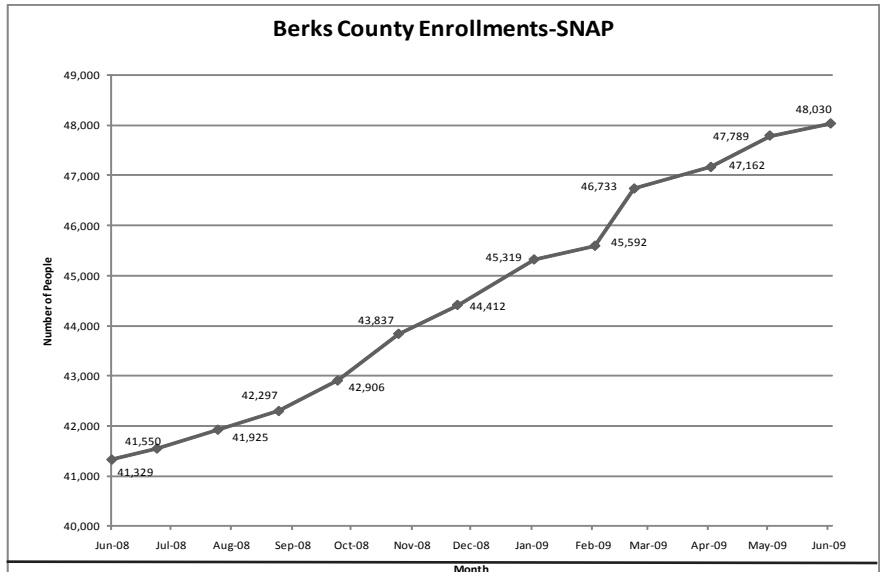
Food insecurity continues to account for the highest number of callers at many agencies across Berks County. Since March of this year, over 2,000 calls requesting assistance with food were made to eight local agencies tracking information for United Way. Comparing June 2008 to June 2009, the Greater Berks Food Bank has seen a 61% increase in monthly calls seeking help with food needs. In 2009, the Helping Hands Food Pantry at United Community Services continues serving over 900 people per month compared to 765 per month in 2008.

The increasing number of SNAP benefit recipients in Berks County further documents that the need for food is on the rise in our local area. SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, formerly known as the Food Stamp Program) is designed to increase food security and reduce hunger by providing access to nutritious food for children and those designated as low-income. At the end of June, 2009, 11.9% (48,030 people) of Berks County residents were SNAP benefit recipients, an increase of 1,297 people alone since the end of March of this year.

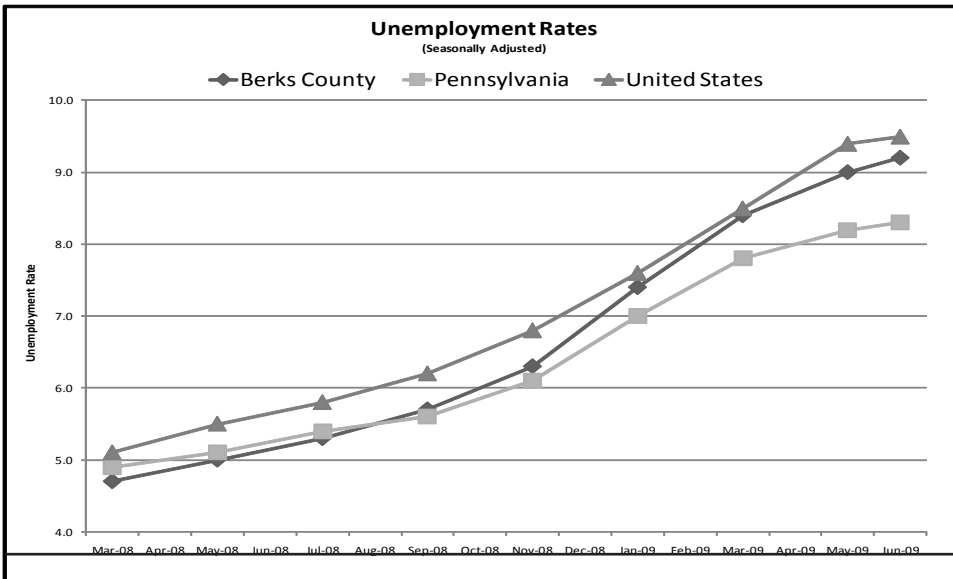
Of particular concern is the high number of children and youth who are suffering from hunger. In June, 2009 (latest data available), 25,654 people, or 53%, of SNAP recipients in Berks County were under the age of 20, the highest percentage of any county in the Commonwealth for that month.

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the average monthly grant for SNAP/Food Stamps is \$101 and the maximum grant for a family of four (with a net annual yearly income of no more than \$21,204) is \$588 per month.

Source: Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare and Advocate's Agenda (Cathleen Palm, Publisher)



Local Unemployment Exceeds State Levels



The unemployment picture for the Berks County area continues to worsen as 2009 progresses. While the positive news is that Berks County's unemployment rates are below the national rates, the rates still greatly exceed those across the state of Pennsylvania.

The June unemployment rate for Berks County was 9.2, accounting for 19,500 unemployed workers across Berks County. This is an increase of 13% since March, and an 86% increase from one year ago in June of 2008. The City of Reading's unemployment rate was 13.7, the 3rd highest rate (behind Hazleton and York) of the state's 80 largest municipalities.

Source: Pennsylvania Center for Workforce Information and Analysis

Requests for Assistance With Basic Needs

In the past three month period, eight local agencies who provide safety net services took over 10,000 calls from residents seeking help with meeting basic needs. Areas of need currently being tracked include: food, shelter, rent assistance, mortgage assistance, heating assistance and utilities, health issues, mental health/depression concerns, disaster assistance, employment issues, furniture, clothing, and transportation.

While the need for food accounts for the highest numbers of callers, help with heating assistance and utilities also remains very high, especially due to overdue payments from the winter months. Since April, the Salvation Army has had an average of 660 calls per month requesting help in this area. Between March and April alone, Catholic Charities' requests for help with heating and utilities rose by 53%.

Rental assistance also is an area of concern for many residents. Friend, Inc. experienced over a 100% increase in requests for help with rent payments between May and June, 2009. For all agencies tracking calls in this area, there was an average of 28 callers per month requesting help with rent, and this average rose to 45 during the month of April.

In conjunction with the rise of Medical Assistance recipients, requests for health care assistance (lack of insurance or prescription coverage) rose sharply between April and June. In April, there were 243 calls among all agencies, and this number rose to 447 in June, an 84% increase. Jewish Family Services experienced a 42% increase between May and June alone with requests for health care assistance.

Agencies currently tracking calls for this report include the following: Berks TALKLINE, Catholic Charities, Friend, Inc., the Greater Berks Food Bank, Jewish Family Services, the Salvation Army, United Community Services and United Way of Berks County

Prescription Assistance

In the last issue of the Community Snapshot, the **FamilyWize Program** was featured as a way residents can save money on prescriptions by simply presenting the FamilyWize card at a participating pharmacy. Since that time, awareness of the program has grown, and an additional \$28,000 has been saved across the county through the use of this card.

Below is a copy of the FamilyWize card that can be cut out and used at a participating pharmacy to receive a discount on any prescription not covered by an insurance plan. For further information, please contact United Way of Berks County at (610) 685-4586 or at jennifer@uwberks.org.

To print more cards, visit United Way's website at www.uwberks.org, or make copies of the one below.



Enrollments in Public Assistance Programs Continue to Grow

Enrollments in Pennsylvania public assistance programs are continuing to grow, with some programs experiencing over a 10% increase in recipients since one year ago in June, 2008.

In the last three months, 648 more Berks Countians became eligible for Medical Assistance. At the end of June, 2009, 16.6% of the county's population was receiving medical assistance, numbering over 67,000 people. CHIP (Children's Health Insurance Program) enrollments have grown by 17% since June of 2008, although enrollment numbers have held steady since March of 2009.

Numbers of cash assistance (welfare) recipients experienced slower increases since the end of March, 2009. TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) provides cash assistance to low-income families with children to help with rent, food and medical care. To receive funds, parents must participate in a work program or be enrolled in an education program that will help them gain self-sustaining employment. Recipients of general assistance are those who do not meet the education and work requirements for TANF, but have a temporary or permanent disability that prevents them from becoming employed.

Source: Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare

Berks County Recipients: Public Assistance Programs

	Cash Assistance Recipients			
	Medical Assistance Recipients	CHIP Enrollment	General Assistance Recipients	TANF Recipients
Jun 08	61,940	5,563	7,242	5,767
Mar 09	66,358	6,321	7,326	5,940
Apr 09	66,882	6,424	7,339	6,005
May 09	67,268	6,550	7,492	6,211
Jun 09	67,006	6,487	7,658	6,375
% change Jun 08-09	8% increase	17% increase	6% increase	11% increase