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Food-stamp outreach effort in R.I. hurt by cut in state, federal aid

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SOUTH KINGSTOWN — Last year, outreach workers at the University of Rhode Island helped more than 1,500 Rhode Islanders apply for food stamps.

They fielded 3,600 hot line calls. And they visited more than 270 soup kitchens, senior centers, schools and other sites in an effort to help the poor and hungry qualify for the food stamp program, formally called Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP.

But a \$200,000 cut in state and federal money will greatly reduce those efforts going forward, said Kathleen Gorman, director of the Feinstein Center for a Hunger Free America at URI.

Outreach workers have already eliminated TV, radio and other advertising because of changes in federal law. The cut will reduce the center's efforts even further, she said. "It means doing less. It means scaling back."

The center does outreach work under a contract with the state Department of Human Services. The U.S. Department of Agriculture encourages states to reach out to residents who might qualify for SNAP benefits. The center's fiscal year started in October.

The cuts couldn't come at a worse time, Gorman said.

Since late 2006, the number of Rhode Islanders using food stamps has jumped from 75,000 to 177,210, a 136 percent increase.

Although the number of SNAP participants peaked at nearly 181,000 last year, the demand for help has remained steady throughout 2014, Gorman said.

"It's still high," she said. "Going down from 181,000 people to 177,210 people is not a big drop. We have no evidence that the economy is improving for people at the bottom rung. Their lives are not getting better."

The Department of Human Services recommended a \$100,000 cut to the outreach budget because of revenue shortfalls, said DHS spokesman Michael Jolin.

In fact, DHS has recommended the cut for several years. Governor Chafee submitted the cut in his last budget and lawmakers approved it, Jolin said.

But the state action means agency won't qualify for a matching \$100,000 federal reimbursement, Gorman said.

The Department of Human Services didn't cut the outreach budget "because they don't like us," she said. "Each year the governor asks the department to cut its budget by 10 percent. But the department has no money left to cut."

Since 2001, the outreach center has increased its budget, Gorman said. The staff includes two full-time workers and about a dozen part-time undergraduate students.

In 2014, the center advertised on Spanish language TV and targeted seniors through direct mailings. Outreach workers spoke to more than 31,000 people and trained others to help low-income Rhode Islanders qualify for assistance.

Outreach workers also helped existing SNAP users with problems. Some state case workers are dealing with more than 2,000 people, Gorman said, and SNAP users can get lost in the paperwork.

They may get less help in 2015, Gorman said.

"This will be our test year. Every week we will have to ask, 'Can we do this, can we do that?'"