

City adds 3,000 cases to soaring welfare load

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The city's welfare caseload has skyrocketed by almost 3,000 cases in one year, to its highest caseload since 2000.

Officials say the numbers speak clearly to the shortage of jobs in the city.

"These numbers recognize that Hamilton has been hit hard by the ravages of the recession," said Tom Cooper, director of the Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction.

"With fewer jobs available, people are being forced to stay on welfare longer."

In September, the most recent month for which figures are available, there were 12,883 welfare cases in Hamilton, compared with last September when there were 10,056.

The city does not collect data that provides profiles of recipients but it's seen a higher-than-average increase in the number of singles compared with families.

Joe-Anne Priel, general manger of the city community services department, said more people may be turning to welfare because they've exhausted their employment insurance.

The increase is also a result of people staying on welfare longer, Priel said.

"More people are coming onto the caseload and fewer people are moving off because of the difficulty in finding jobs," Priel said.

While some economists had declared the recession over, the city's welfare caseload suggests otherwise.

Priel said the city will be forced to dip into reserves to cover the costs of the higher caseload, which will put it over budget by almost \$2.3 million.

The city shares the cost of Ontario Works with the province, with the city picking up 20 per cent.

Priel said Hamilton typically sees a slight decrease in caseload numbers in November and December because people find retail jobs.

"We'll just keep watching," she said.

Joanne Santucci, executive director of Hamilton Food Share, said the increase in welfare cases has pushed up demand at the city's nine food banks.

The number of people who used food banks in 2009 was the highest ever recorded by a Hamilton Hunger Count report, put together by the Emergency Food Action Committee. Food bank use is measured each March and the number of households that used local food banks this year was up 23.3 per cent from 2008, reaching 7,685. The number of individuals rose 26 per cent to 19,602.

Santucci said there have been many times when food banks simply haven't had the staffing or food to keep up with the demand.

"We've been in crisis mode for at least a year now," Santucci said.

Yesterday, the emergency and community services committee recommended giving an extra \$55,000 to Hamilton Food Share for this year's Christmas hampers. That brings the city's total commitment to \$100,000. It will go to council for final approval Wednesday.

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