

Food stamp list swells to record 32.2 million

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WASHINGTON (Reuters) – A record 32.2 million people -- one in every 10 Americans -- received food stamps at latest count, the government said on Thursday, a reflection of the recession now in its 16th month.

Food stamps are the major U.S. antihunger program and help poor people buy groceries. The average benefit was \$112.82 per person in January.

The January figure marks the third time in five months that enrollment set a record.

"A weakened economy means that many more individuals are turning to SNAP/Food Stamps," said the Food Research and Action Center, an antihunger group, using the acronym for the renamed food stamp program, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.

The U.S. unemployment rate was 8.1 percent in February, the highest in 25 years. Weekly claims for jobless benefits totaled 669,000 last week, the highest in 26 years, the government said on Thursday.

Food stamp enrollment rose in all but four of the 50 states during January, said Agriculture Department figures. Vermont, Alaska and South Dakota had increases of more than 5 percent. Texas had the largest enrollment, 2.984 million, down 65,000, followed by California at 2.545 million, up 43,000, and New York with 2.211 million, up 37,000.

Food stamp benefits get a temporary 13 percent increase, beginning with this month, under the economic stimulus law signed by President Barack Obama. The increase equals \$80 a month for a household of four.

Recent food stamp data

Month Enrollment

September 2008 31.587 million

October 2008 31.050 million

November 2008 31.097 million

December 2008 31.784 million

January 2009 32.205 million

(Reporting by Charles Abbott; Editing by Christian Wiessner)

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