

Crisis becomes calamity as jobs vanish

Ranks of working poor grow, aid stretched thin, as economy nose dives throughout Ohio

By Dennis J. Willard

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COLUMBUS: Republicans like to believe Ohio is a red state. Democrats, for their part, maintain it is a blue state.

Actually, Ohio is a purple state, and this is not good news, because the people with the crayons are in the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services.

Each month, Job and Family Services puts out a map of the 88 counties, assigns an unemployment figure for each county, and color codes the results using yellow, sky blue, green and purple.

Ohio's economic fate can be glimpsed with a quick glance at two maps — one from February 2006 and the other four years later.

The view is alarming.

In February 2006, four Appalachian counties — Morgan, Monroe, Meigs and Pike — had unemployment rates of 10 percent or more and were shaded purple.

Four years later, 21 counties, or almost one in four in Ohio, are purple.

It's even worse because Job and Family Services changed the criteria since 2006: Those 21 counties have unemployment rates of 15 percent or higher.

Using the old standard, the map would be a purple blotch, because since 2006 the number of counties with an unemployment rate of 10 percent or higher grew from four to 81.

The seven remaining counties all have rates of 9 percent or higher, which means the four-tone map could be completed now with only two colors.

Dan Flowers, president and CEO of the Akron-Canton Regional Foodbank, doesn't need a map to tell him that families are hurting and need help.

"In the last two years, we've seen the most dramatic increases," Flowers said.

The number of pantry clients increased by 25 percent from 2008 to 2009, and in the first quarter of 2010 the food bank has handed out 1 million more pounds of food compared to the first three months of 2009, Flowers said.

"We have had no letup despite reports that the economy is improving," Flowers said.

He has noticed a change in the food bank's patrons. In the past, Flowers said, the people coming to his organization for help were often chronically ill, disabled or elderly.

"Now, you have an emergence of the working poor. The number of first-time clients has increased. And you have people who lost their jobs and never thought they would need to come to a food bank for help," he said.

Lisa Hamler-Fugitt spends most of her waking hours ringing a warning bell for the hungry in this state as executive director for the Ohio Association of Second Harvest Food Banks.

She is a lobbyist, but not the stereotypical high-priced suit that comes to mind when that word is mentioned.

"What is it going to take for people to wake up?" Hamler-Fugitt asked. "Our state is collapsing into absolute poverty."

In her eyes, here's the sad thing about the maps: They don't begin to tell the entire story of how bad it is across Ohio.

Hamler-Fugitt travels to counties and visits food banks where people stand in line for hours. They don't have a job or food for themselves or their children. They have moved in with other family members or friends. They are forced to make choices between heat and food, food and medicine, she said.

"People are so angry. They feel as if they have been abandoned. They have done the right thing all their lives. They have lived by the rules," she said. "There are a lot of very angry, frustrated people in this state.

"I have been saying this for a while, but no one is listening. If the private sector cannot create jobs, then the government has to step in and create jobs. We need a massive, massive public works program in this state and country."

Five years ago, the Ohio Republican-controlled House and Senate and then-Gov. Bob Taft did something massive, but it wasn't a public-works program. They overhauled the state's tax code, phased out taxes on corporations and reduced the income tax across the board.

This was done in the name of creating jobs, but the experiment to put more money back into the hands of corporations and entrepreneurs to stimulate the economy is not working. (Tax-reform supporters argue the state would be even worse off if not for the changes five years ago.)

How much worse can it get?

Hamler-Fugitt points out that the unemployment figures in each county reflect the number of people the government tracks, and not the true number of people out of work, or employed part time or in "sometime work" — as in sometimes you work and most times you don't.

The same year that Ohio had four purple counties, when the criteria was 10 percent rather than 15 percent unemployment to qualify, Democrat Ted Strickland ran for governor. He promised to turn around Ohio.

He promised to create gobs of jobs, but the ship of state has not turned. Instead, it is sinking.

The improved tax climate and Strickland's efforts to address the state's economy did not protect 8,000 jobs at the DHL Express USA distribution facility in Clinton County in southwest Ohio.

That county's unemployment rate jumped from 5.7 percent in 2006 to 19 percent as of February.

A different set of maps tracking the same four-year period is also revelatory.

For 28 years, the federal government has poured money into the emergency food and shelter program primarily based on a mixed criteria of poverty and unemployment rates.

The counties that met the eligibility requirements were typically in Appalachia and in the northeastern part of the state that suffered from a blend of urban poverty and manufacturing job losses.

In 2006, 62 counties were eligible for the funding. Four years later, the number had increased to 79 of the 88 counties, including nine counties that were added to the list since 2009.

The new poor counties, according to these two maps, are in the level, fertile farmlands and smaller cities spreading across west and northwest Ohio.

The economic crisis facing Ohio is now epidemic.

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