ATLANTIC COUNTY'S FOOD INSECURITY PROBLEM MADE MUCH WORSE BY COVID-19

DINO FLAMMIA | Published: September 20, 2020

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Before the **COVID-19 health emergency** hit New Jersey, forcing businesses closed and thousands of people out of their jobs, a significant share of Atlantic County residents were already struggling with regularly putting food on the table — about 20% failing to buy food whey had run out, and 14% skipping a meal because they couldn't afford anything to eat, according to a poll conducted in March.

So when the pandemic struck soon after, the shore county was thrown into a food insecurity crisis, perhaps more than any other county in the Garden State, according to a research paper published by the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at Stockton University.

According to the report crafted by student Garrett Bolton with assistance from research associate Alyssa Maurice, Atlantic County was especially hit hard because of the exceptionally large impact of business closures, specifically in the casino industry and surrounding hospitality economy.

In June, the county recorded the highest year-over-year unemployment rate increase (379%) in the United States, the report said. In April, when casinos were still fully closed in an effort to limit the spread of COVID-19, Atlantic County's unemployment rate hit nearly 34%, more than double the state and national rates.

From the start of 2020 through June, Atlantic County residents made, proportionally, the highest rate of NJ 211 hotline calls for information on food assistance, the report said. The number of county residents participating in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (food stamps) rose at a time when it would typically dip, heading into the summer tourism season.

"We also know that there are people that are out of work facing financial hardship and a loss of income, who are not necessarily reflected in these assistance numbers," Maurice said.

That's because many casino and hospitality workers, she said, did not qualify for food stamps due to the amount of unemployment benefits coming in.

"A lot of the unemployment money is going towards the typical living expenses and bills, and towards their health insurance ... so they are really having to rely on food banks," Maurice said. "There is concern that this increased demand and this hardship is going to continue well into the fall and the colder months."

Atlantic City casinos workers received more than 3,000 meal kits from the Community Food Bank of New Jersey by the end of June, the report said. Beyond that, "miles-long lines of cars waiting to receive free food baskets" were documented in the county.

"Behind all the statistics in this report is a portrait of real people grappling with the challenge of providing enough food for their families," said John Froonjian, executive director of the Hughes Center.

The report by Bolton, a political science major from Mercer County, served as a follow-up to a Stockton poll of residents conducted in March.

Since reopening in early July, **casinos remain limited to 25% capacity**; the same goes for indoor dining at restaurants. Smoking remains prohibited in the indoor areas of casinos.

Since the pandemic hit in mid-March, more than 1.5 million New Jerseyans filed for unemployment benefits. The state has regained more than 400,000 jobs since April.

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