The load on the state's safety net for Palm Beach County's poorest families has tripled since the 2007, with staggering increases every year in the number of individuals using food stamps to feed their families.

In Palm Beach County, 161,250 of the county's 1.3 million residents - 12.4 percent - received food stamps in August, close to 22,000 more than last year and triple the amount from August 2007, according to data from the state Department of Children and Families. The number of low-income, elderly and disabled people who received Medicaid through DCF has also steadily increased throughout the last four years, from 90,163 in August 2007 to 152,686 in August 2011.

Food stamp use grew faster in Palm Beach County than in Florida as a whole, though the state's numbers more than doubled in four years, from 1.3 million in August 2007 to 3.2 million in August 2011.

"Hearing those numbers just makes me depressed, and that's just a signal of what's going on here locally, that so many people have just lost jobs and don't have income," said Pam Cahoon, executive director of C.R.O.S. Ministries, which partners with DCF to help families fill out applications for food stamps and other government aid.

Cahoon said she's seen many economic ups and downs, but the steady increase in demand for government aid shows this weak economy may be different.

"The demographics of the people have changed," Cahoon said. "It's much more people saying, 'I never thought I would be in this situation; how can my family be here?' Or, 'I used to give to you; now I'm getting.'"

Geneva Wilkins, 75, of Boynton Beach, said it hadn't crossed her mind to ask the government for help to put food on her table.

With her and her husband's $626 in monthly Social Security benefits and money she earned cleaning houses, Wilkins always had enough to pay the bills and buy food.

But she had a stroke last year and had to quit her cleaning job. Her earnings were reduced dramatically and she decided to apply for food stamps.

"I didn't want to depend on help, but what can I do?" Wilkins said. "We just don't have the money to pay for things and every week things don't get better."
High unemployment rates among people once economically stable may be affecting the demand for food stamps and Medicaid across the county, DCF regional director Perry Borman said.

"In the last three years, the face of individuals and families who are seeking public benefit assistance is different than I think it was four or five years ago or longer," Borman said. "It could be a family where both parents just lost their jobs and have never had to seek this assistance before. It's people who are new to the whole process of applying for benefits."

More residents who never thought they would be eligible for food stamps have applied, said Terry Jurewicz, project coordinator for the Palm Beach County Community Food Alliance.

"I think there's been a push to make people aware of food stamps and to make it easier for them to get signed up and maybe that has something to do with the increases," she said.

C.R.O.S. Ministries hired two people to process government aid applications and market eligibility requirements in the county, Borman said.

"We are trying to get as many qualified residents to apply for food stamps as possible. I don't think that was the case two or three years ago, or before," Borman said.

Broward and Miami-Dade counties also saw increases in food stamp use, with Broward more than doubling its demand, from 99,946 in August 2007 to more than 245,000 in August 2011, and Miami-Dade with about twice as many food stamp clients, from 293,827 to almost 600,000.

Despite big increases in demand for food stamps and Medicaid in Palm Beach County, DCF officials said, a slight slowing of the growth rate of food stamp requests this year could be a sign of hope. According to DCF records, there was a 43 percent jump in food stamp requests from January 2010 to January 2011, but just a 5.8 percent jump so far this year.

"It's not our job to make predictions on data, but we've seen signs of the economy bouncing back this year and we think food stamp numbers are going to plateau and start decreasing as the economy bounces back," said Joe Follick, DCF's communications director.

The Temporary Cash Assistance program, which offers money to families in need, has also seen a dip in demand. Follick said part of the reason for the decline could be that individuals have a 48-month lifetime limit on cash assistance, and many could have used up their allotment.

"But I think the largest reason is the same reason for the slowing of the rate of food stamp usage, and that's that the economy is bouncing back," he added.

Sharmila Vishwasrao, associate professor of economics at Florida Atlantic University, said employment numbers are slightly better for Florida and the U.S. compared with six months ago and that could be reflected in aid demand.

"Getting even a low-paid or temporary job is likely to reduce the need for cash assistance," Vishwasrao said. "Of course, the improvement is rather small compared to where we were five years ago."

Dianna Stanley, director of The Lord's Place social services agency in West Palm Beach, said that those people who applied for aid months or years ago may have received the financial push they needed to become financially self-sufficient, and it's being reflected in the numbers.
But she is relieved that people who need help are taking advantage of the resources.

"Thank God, families are finally reaching out to a service that is so critical," Stanley said.

"We live in a nation where food stamps are available, and it's a good sign that people are reaching out."