For first time since 2007, food stamp use drops in state, Palm Beach County

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For the first time in nearly six years, the number of people on food stamps in Palm Beach County fell in February, according to data from the Florida Department of Children and Families.

The drop was small: from 194,333 in January to 193,970 in February but the numbers are headed in the right direction, state officials said.

"It's great news," said DCF spokesman Joe Follick."With more Floridians working, this decrease in the number of people receiving temporary benefits has been expected."

The state also saw an overall decline with the total number of people on food stamps in Florida dropping nearly 3,000 in a month to 3.61 million. Broward had small increases in February, adding only about 660 more recipients for a total of 287,390.

The state's February food stamp report was a sharp improvement from last year when the number of food stamp recipients in Palm Beach County jumped nearly 14 percent, Broward's numbers grew 11 percent while the state's numbers rose 8 percent.

Follick noted 200,000 jobs have been created in the state in two years with Florida's unemployment falling from 11.1 to 7.9 percent.

"While the number of people receiving benefits can fluctuate, we're confident that the trend has reversed in a positive direction as more families find the opportunity to work and live independently," he said.

The decline in food stamps is "all evidence that the economy is coming back," said economist William B. Stronge, a professor emeritus at Florida Atlantic University.

He predicted the state will have a strong jobs report when it is released next week to reflect the nation's earlier better-than-expected employment report.

What's helping South Florida -- Palm Beach County in particular -- is that more construction jobs are returning, Stronge added. "That's a big driver in our local economy," he said.
More international trade, an increased number of people moving here and a record number of tourists in South Florida have also helped, suggested Jorge Salazar-Carrillo, an economics professor who directs the Center of Economic Research at Florida International University.

South Florida is helping the entire state rebound with Florida right now doing much better than many other states, Salazar-Carrillo added.

"We're beginning to see a clearer light at the end of the tunnel," he said.