

## S.B. County's welfare rolls spike

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SAN BERNARDINO • Tasked with providing for a household of six in Old Town Victorville, Judy Musgrave is scraping by to make ends meet and raise her youngest grandchildren.

For free meals and clothing, the soft-spoken 65-year-old frequents the Victor Valley Rescue Mission, where she's also a familiar volunteer. Her 20-hour work week at the Goodwill thrift store was recently cut in half, so she relies on Social Security payments, trips to the recycling center and odd jobs here and there to pay the bills.

But Musgrave has not applied for public assistance for her or her family — unlike more than one-third of the High Desert's population.

"I really feel like there's other people that deserve it more than I do," said Musgrave, explaining how her coal-mining father taught her about the work ethic. "Maybe it's pride, I don't know, I just didn't really ever expect to have to. ... It's never been this bad as far as I can remember."

She's trying to avoid joining the public rolls so many others have turned to: Some 35 percent of people in the High Desert are now on welfare — up from the 22 percent of residents who received aid in 2006, according to the latest figures released by San Bernardino County. The data includes cash aid, food stamps and Medi-Cal insurance coverage.

"What is surprising to us is we're seeing people who have to use these programs for the very first time," Kevin Mahany, director of advocacy at St. Mary Medical Center, said. His team has noticed a steady uptick in families applying for Medi-Cal. "It's not that old cliché that they're good for nothing and all they want to do is live off the system."

Within the High Desert's five incorporated cities, the proportion of people getting aid ranged from 27.5 percent in Apple Valley to 46.3 percent in Barstow.

The growing number of people depending on welfare reflects the region's unhealthy economy as it struggles to rebound from the recession's gut-wrenching hits to the construction industry. In June, unemployment climbed by around 1 percent in every High Desert city, settling between 15 percent and 22 percent.

"I think a lot of people are giving up," Ron Wilson, executive director of the Rescue Mission, said. "There's no jobs out there. They're getting tired of being told no."

High Desert cities are home to 16.2 percent of San Bernardino County's population, but High Desert residents are racking up nearly one-quarter of annual welfare expenditures countywide. In 2011, High Desert welfare recipients will get benefits valued at \$620.3 million — more than double their share from five years ago.