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Santa Cruz Co. public assistance up

The number of people in public-assistance programs has risen sharply in the last year, Santa Cruz County supervisors were told yesterday.

Will Lightbourne, the county's Human Resources Agency director, said there were increases of 10 percent in recipients of Aid To Families With Dependent Children, of 28 percent in food stamps, and of 58 percent in general assistance. General assistance is for people who don't have children and is the smallest of the county's welfare programs.

The number of people on Medi-

Cal has risen 43 percent, in part because of new rules that make more people eligible.

Lightbourne said the current recession is the main reason for the increase. He said members of his staff told him there have been fluctuations in the number of recipients over the years, but no increases like the ones over the last year.

Lightbourne made the comments during the supervisors' discussion of the budget limitations they will be facing this year.

In an interview after the meeting, Lightbourne said there's also

a hidden impact of the recession: self-employed people who are out of work, yet not eligible for unemployment benefits.

"There are a lot of self-employed people in Santa Cruz," Lightbourne said, some making minimal amounts of money. When their sources of income dries up, they apply for various forms of assistance.

There are 3,406 people in the county on AFDC, 3,986 on Medi-Cal, 2,712 on food stamps (not counting those on AFDC, almost all of whom get food stamps) and 223 on general assistance.

—Lane Wallace