

POVERTY SITUATION IN AUSTIN, MINNESOTA GROWING



Plenty of counties throughout southeastern Minnesota have many job opportunities and low unemployment rates, but the middle to lower classes are dealing with very tough times right now. In just a couple of years, those who had good jobs and plenty of food to eat are now struggling mightily. The Channel One Food Bank and Food shelf are indicators of the tough times in Rochester. "We hear stories more and more of people who never thought they'd be in a position to need a food shelf, and here they are," said Jennifer Woodford, communication and development director of Channel One in Rochester, according to the [Austin Daily Herald](#). The unemployment rate in Olmstead is 4.4 percent, according to the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development. That percentage equates to 3,652 people. The counties of Mower and Freeborn have higher rates at 4.6 percent (981 people) and 5.8 percent (966 people), respectively. All of these counties in Minnesota are doing better than the national average, which is around nine percent. "We've been relatively isolated as a state from unemployment," Woodford said, "But in Olmsted County, they have under-employment. For the last 18 months, we have had 200 new households register to use the food shelf, every month. It's been 200 or more. ... And those are households, not people." From the United Way of Mower County, executive director Mandi Lighthizer-Schmidt understands that money today does not go nearly as far as it used to in the past. Lighthizer-Schmidt has met plenty of people in her office who come in for help because they cannot pay their bills. She said that the problem comes in Mower and Freeborn counties because the median household income ranges from \$42,000 to \$44,000. "Forty-four thousand dollars is not much for a family of four," Lighthizer-Schmidt said. "Most of our young families aren't making anywhere near that." Austin has a growing number of Hispanic families, with 63 percent of those in Mower County living below the poverty line. The Hispanic population of Austin has doubled over the past decade, increasing from 1,400 to 3,800 people, which is good for a 166 percent increase. This is comparable to a trend across the state, where the state population of Hispanics grew by 74 percent over the past decade. Lighthizer-Schmidt noted that many of the working poor residents might not realize that they actually qualify for food benefits from the state. These benefits could come from the Food Shelf or the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, which used to be called food stamps. "We know that there's a tremendous amount of people who would qualify for food support but don't apply," she said. Others in the state refuse to apply for food support because of the stigma that comes with it and their own personal pride. "I think that will always be part of the problem for some people. I think that there is starting to be a greater understanding that it's OK," Woodford said. "Getting a helping hand is OK, and it's nothing to be ashamed of. ... You have to feed your kids, and if that comes with a little help from Channel One, great."

<https://blog.granted.com/>