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Isles miss out on millions in food stamps, study finds

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More than \$200 million worth of food stamps are not going to eligible Hawaii residents, according to a new study looking at figures from 2011, the most recent data available.

That represents a missed opportunity to fuel Hawaii's economy, said Victor Geminiani, executive director of the Hawaii Appleseed Center on Law and Economic Justice.

"When people get food stamps, they spend this money immediately at places like mom and pop stores," Geminiani said. "You get the economy stimulated."

When it comes to eligible residents receiving federally funded food stamps and low-income tax credits, Hawaii in 2011 ranked second worst in the nation, according to a report released by the Hawaii Appleseed Center.

In 2010, Hawaii's standing was slightly better — 46th in the nation — in terms of eligible low-income residents who received food stamps and the tax credits, according to the report.

But in 2011, when the latest data were available, only 2 out of 3 eligible recipients statewide received food stamps, for a total of \$446 million. That meant that \$209.4 million worth of food stamps were not distributed to eligible Hawaii residents, Geminiani said.

In 2010, the center sued the state Department of Human Services in federal court for not following federal guidelines to process food stamp applications in a timely manner. In January 2012, U.S. District Judge David Ezra ordered the department to correct those problems.

Officials with the department on Friday did not immediately respond to a request for comment on the study's findings.

Hawaii's drop in ranking to 49th in the country in 2011 was the result of progress by other states and Hawaii's continuing inability to create an easy online application process — and better partner with nonprofit groups that can help low-income residents apply for food stamps and other assistance programs, Geminiani said.

"A lot of other states are a lot more sophisticated," he said. "We have not kept abreast of the technological advances ... that have been developed in the last 10, 15 years."

Jenny Lee, an attorney with the Hawaii Appleseed Center and primary author of the study, said while other states have increased the number of eligible residents receiving federal aid, Hawaii has fallen behind because "we're staying where we are."

The federal government pays 50 percent of all of Hawaii's costs to administer the food stamp program,

Geminiani said.

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