



## Fresno County Has Benefitted From Jobs Program

By Jean Ross

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Amid all the bad news about the economy, there has been one bright spot for Fresno County this year: a federally funded jobs program that has resulted in 1,000 jobs for people who might have otherwise remained without work.

Supported by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, this program employs low-income Californians, many of whom receive cash assistance through CalWORKs, the state's welfare-to-work program. These jobs, which are at least 20 hours per week, and often full-time, haven't just helped struggling families with children find work, gain marketable skills, and transition off welfare. They've given a needed boost to local economies and helped businesses avoid layoffs and hire the workers they need.

Close to 15,000 jobs have been funded in California through this program, including 1,000 in Fresno County, 450 in Tulare County and more than 5,500 in Los Angeles County. Around the country, the funding has been used to create jobs, and assist communities hard hit by plant closings or particularly high unemployment.

But the clock is ticking. With funding set to expire later this year, the program may be forced to shut down even as California still faces double-digit unemployment rates.

Although President Obama's budget proposal extends the program through 2011 and includes an additional \$2.5 billion in support, Congress must take immediate action to prevent counties from dismantling their programs as early as next month.

Action is needed quickly to extend and expand the TANF Emergency Fund, which supports these jobs, and to increase the maximum amount of funding a state can receive. With jobs so tough to come by, the nation can't afford unnecessary delay.

We know the job market will remain tough for Californians — and Americans — for some time. California has lost more than 1 million jobs since the recession began, and now has approximately the same number of jobs as it did a decade ago, when there were 3.6 million fewer working-age Californians. Fresno County's own unemployment rate soared to 16.8% in December.

The economic news is expected to remain grim in the near future: Forecasters predict that the economic recovery is going to be long and slow, with double-digit unemployment rates expected for the next few years. To help make ends meet, families hard hit by the recession are turning to programs, such as food stamps, in record numbers.

Economists have long recognized that helping low-income families is one of the most effective ways to boost the economy. That's because money that goes into the pocketbooks of struggling families goes right back out to landlords, grocery stores, gas stations and other merchants, providing a boost to local businesses.

Using public funds to create jobs may seem reminiscent of the New Deal — the economic programs championed by President Roosevelt in the 1930s — and, like the New Deal, this program has received bipartisan support.

Gov. Haley Barbour of Mississippi, a Republican, has lauded the program for improving the economy and putting welfare recipients to work. Estimates suggest that more than three-quarters of the Fresno County families employed through the program will successfully move from welfare to work.

Creating jobs, stimulating the economy and providing a transition from welfare to work: This jobs program is good news for California at a time when good news is sorely needed. Let's keep it going.