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■ Former Colorado Gov. Richard Lamm talks the Perot line./3B

Fewer people on welfare in county, state

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Mostly lost in the raging local and national debates on reforming the welfare system is this significant trend: More and more people are leaving the rolls.

In the past two years, Santa Clara County's welfare rolls have dropped by 9 percent. Across the nation, the number of welfare recipients is down 9 percent since 1993. The numbers are less dramatic in California as a whole and in neighboring

Reduction credited to improved economy, reforms.

counties like Alameda, but statistics show slight declines since last year in those locales as well.

Government officials and welfare analysts attribute the decline mostly to a strengthening economy but also to reform efforts already in place. Recipients saw the

latest piece of California's reform Saturday, when they opened their monthly checks to find a payment 2.3 percent lower than last month's.

But other welfare watchers, and even recipients themselves, say some people are leaving the rolls simply because they feel

threatened by the increasing calls for "ending welfare as we know it."

"It's scary," said Lisa Cuevas, a San Jose mother of four and 21-year welfare recipient, who is now trying to turn her counseling skills into a career. "It's either get a job or be stuck out there with nothing."

Despite those fears, Gov. Pete Wilson has so far been rebuffed in his attempts to remove able-bodied adults from the basic welfare program, known as Aid to Families
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Fewer Santa Clara County residents on welfare rolls

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with Dependent Children (AFDC), after two years.

Other major statewide reforms — including a rule that would no longer grant women bigger welfare checks if they have more children — were approved by the state Legislature but never received federal approval.

But some welfare reductions have become state law. Since Wilson took office in 1991, the grant for a family of three has dipped 14 percent, from \$694 to \$594. Californians can now make more at a minimum-wage job than on welfare, which wasn't true five years ago.

In Santa Clara County, social services officials are now developing their own welfare reform proposal. While details aren't clear, these officials oppose any plan that would cut off AFDC payments after a certain time. They worry that would force recipients into the county's other general welfare program, which is funded entirely by local taxpayers.

Today, about 29,000 families receive AFDC in the county, down from a high of 32,700 families in June 1994. Because of the decline, officials will close a San Jose welfare office this year.

Most county officials attribute the shrinking numbers to the recovery of Silicon Valley's economy.

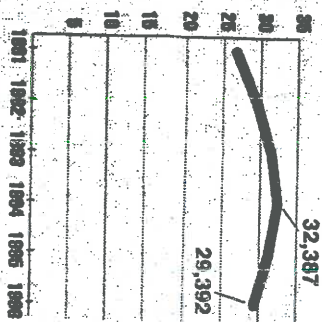
They also point to the increasing number of welfare recipients who now go through the educational program known as Greater Avenues for Independence (GAIN), which often leads to jobs. About 6,500 people will graduate from the program this year, said Alette Lundberg, the county's GAIN director, more than three times the number of graduates in 1992.

For many years, the waiting

Welfare caseload

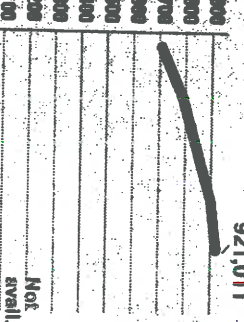
SANTA CLARA COUNTY

Thousands of cases



STATEWIDE

Thousands of cases



Sources: Santa Clara County Social Services Agency, California Department of Social Services

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list to attend GAIN was over 10,000 people. Today, the list is down to 7,000, Lundberg said.

Laura Price, a mother of two who lives in Sunnyvale, said she was so determined to get off welfare that she applied to the GAIN program as soon as she began receiving benefits. But it took her two years to get into the program, which ultimately landed her a job installing fire sprinkler systems.

"I don't plan on ever going back on welfare," said Price, who added she knows other mothers still

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on welfare who feel threatened by Wilson's attempts at reform.

Other welfare advocates say Wilson's repeated slashing of welfare checks may simply be forcing the county's AFDC recipients to rural counties where rents are lower.

"It's not that people are getting off welfare," said Kevin Aslanian with the Coalition of California Welfare Rights Organizations. "It's not that the Pete Wilson theory is working. . . . Out of desperation, they get up and go to another county."

And indeed, despite the lower monthly checks and new programs encouraging people to work, California as a whole has not experienced the same downward trend in welfare cases as Santa Clara County or the rest of

the nation.

Before last year, the number of Californians receiving AFDC was growing at four times the rate of state population growth. Only recently has that explosive growth leveled off. About 1 percent fewer people statewide are now on aid compared to one year ago.

But that decrease is slight compared with the 9 percent decline nationwide and much bigger drops in several states. A recent Washington Post survey concluded that 42 of the 50 states had experienced a decline in welfare cases.

In Massachusetts, for example, where welfare recipients with school-aged children must go to work, the rolls have declined 29 percent since 1993. In comparison, California's rolls are up

about 10 percent from their 1993 levels.

Wilson administration officials say the reforms are working. "California is two years behind other states in coming out of the recession," said Lisa Kalustian, spokeswoman for the state Health and Welfare Agency. The numbers should soon begin to drop significantly, she said.

Yet some welfare recipients say it will take more than a better economy and available jobs to get some longtime AFDC recipients off the rolls. Instead, something must happen to change long-held attitudes.

Said Lisa Cuevas of San Jose, "You have to want it."