Rhode Island Ranks Highest in New England for Food Insecurity

The number of Rhode Islanders served at food pantries jumped 10 percent last year.

Without Jobs, More Rhode Islanders Seek Food Assistance

Even though the Great Recession officially ended three years ago, it continues to rob Rhode Island of jobs. There are fewer employed Rhode Islanders now than at any time in the past 15 years. Rhode Island’s unemployment rate remains in double digits, the second highest in the country.

As the long-term jobless exhaust their unemployment benefits, they increasingly rely on government and charitable programs to feed their families. Enrollment in SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, formerly the Food Stamp Program) has more than doubled since 2007. Over 175,000 Rhode Islanders currently receive SNAP benefits. At the same time, the number of people served monthly at food pantries in Rhode Island continues to grow, jumping 10 percent in the last year.

Major Findings

- Rhode Island ranks highest in food insecurity among New England states
- The Rhode Island Community Food Bank’s agency network feeds 66,000 people each month
- Food donations have dropped at a time of record need
- Twenty-four percent of Rhode Island households receive SNAP (Food Stamp) benefits
- Federal nutrition programs pump $343 million into the local food economy

The Rhode Island Community Food Bank annually produces this Status Report to document the extent of food insecurity and hunger in the state. In the aftermath of the Great Recession, with unemployment remaining persistently high, the need for food assistance is at a record level. The 2012 Status Report shows that thousands of Rhode Islanders cannot afford adequate food and would go hungry if it were not for federal nutrition programs and the Food Bank’s statewide network of emergency food programs. However, these programs are being threatened by cuts proposed in Congress and declining food donations. The Status Report concludes with recommendations for how to keep the state’s nutrition safety net strong.
The Rhode Island Community Food Bank and its 178 Member Agencies, with 233 sites in Rhode Island, serve more people today than at any time in the past. Food pantries, meal programs and shelters provided 17.9 million meals to people in need between July 2011 and June 2012. During this 12-month period, the Food Bank distributed 9.7 million pounds of food.

**Grocery Industry Efficiency Means Less Surplus Food**

Trends in food manufacturing have dramatically affected the Food Bank’s supply of donated food in recent years. When the Food Bank was founded thirty years ago, a significant amount of the food available for distribution came from food companies that found themselves with unexpected surplus due to over-production or minor manufacturing errors, such as a misprint on a cereal box. Food companies were faced with the choice of throwing away the surplus or donating it to a food bank that could safely distribute it to people in need. The choice was obvious.

Food Bank Increases Wholesale Purchasing

The Food Bank now must purchase food from wholesalers to ensure a continuous supply of food. In order to leverage the best prices and reduce transportation costs, the Rhode Island Community Food Bank partners with other food banks in New England. Food purchases, which are made possible by charitable giving and state funding, account for 39 percent of the food currently distributed by the Food Bank.

Food Donations Drop at Time of Record Need

**EMERGENcy FOOD PROGRAMS PROVIDE 17.9 MILLION MEALS**

Improvements in the food manufacturing industry, including just-in-time inventory and quality control procedures, have dramatically reduced the surplus food available for donation. While many food companies continue to support the Food Bank philanthropically, the fact remains that food donations to the Food Bank have declined by almost two million pounds in the last four years.

Food Bank Focuses on Healthy Foods

While the trend in food donations presents challenges, it also offers opportunities. Rather than relying on the unpredictable mix of donated food, the Food Bank is able to select healthier food choices—such as brown rice, tuna or canned beans—when purchasing food. This results in healthier options for families and greater consistency of supply at local food pantries.
The Food Bank Network of Member Agencies

The number indicated for each city or town is the total number of sites in that location.

The Food Bank distributes to 233 sites in Rhode Island through its network of Member Agencies, including:

- emergency food pantries
- meal programs
- shelters
- transitional housing
- group homes
- senior centers
- daycare and after-school programs
Rhode Island Has Highest Food Insecurity in New England

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Rate of Food Insecurity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rhode Island</td>
<td>15.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maine</td>
<td>14.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vermont</td>
<td>12.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connecticut</td>
<td>11.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Massachusetts</td>
<td>11.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Hampshire</td>
<td>9.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The prevalence of food insecurity in Rhode Island has increased significantly since 2008 from 11.7% to 15.5%. Over one-third of food insecure households (26,000 households) report the most severe conditions associated with hunger.

Households Reporting Moderate and Severe Food Insecurity

Food insecurity increased dramatically in Rhode Island following the Great Recession.
Federal Nutrition Programs Prevent Hunger and Boost the Rhode Island Economy

The federal nutrition programs, which are a critical resource for low-income individuals and families, include SNAP, WIC (the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children), National School Lunch, School Breakfast and Summer Food Service Programs. Together these five programs annually bring over $323 million in federal aid to Rhode Island.5

With Twenty-Four Percent of Households on SNAP, State Caseloads Top 2,000
Nearly one in four Rhode Island households (97,491 households as of August 2012) is enrolled in SNAP. Benefits are delivered by EBT (Electronic Benefit Transfer) cards that can only be used to purchase food at authorized stores. While offering critical help for struggling families, SNAP benefits are modest. In Rhode Island, the average monthly benefit is just $265 per household.6

Over the past four years, as SNAP enrollment doubled, the number of caseworkers at the Rhode Island Department of Human Services (DHS) did not increase. SNAP caseloads now top 2,000 per worker, limiting both customer service and timely response to application problems. Further adding to the administrative burden on caseworkers, 18 clerical workers hired through the 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act were recently dismissed when stimulus funding ended.

WIC Promotes Healthy Eating
WIC provides food, nutrition education, breastfeeding support and referrals to health care and social services to low-income pregnant women, new mothers, infants and young children up to age five. There are 24,000 WIC participants in Rhode Island, though more than 40,000 women and children qualify for the program.7 The average WIC food benefit is $50 per participant per month.8

In 2009, the program made changes to improve the health and nutrition of participating women and children by adding more fruits, vegetables and whole grains to traditional WIC food packages. Researchers found that after WIC introduced these changes, convenience and grocery stores in low-income communities began to stock healthier foods.9

Standards Raised for School Meals
The National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs reimburse school districts for free or reduced-price meals served to students from low-income households. On average, 51,300 Rhode Island students receive free or reduced-price lunch each school day and 29,070 participate in the breakfast program.10 In the coming year, the USDA will increase federal reimbursements for school meals that meet new nutrition standards.11 Fortunately, the state is well-positioned to receive these higher payments, since the Rhode Island Department of Education established new nutrition requirements in 2009 including more fruits, vegetables and whole grains.

Federal Dollars Received by Rhode Island for Nutrition Programs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Five Federal Nutrition Programs</th>
<th>Federal Dollars to Rhode Island (Fiscal Year 2011)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SNAP</td>
<td>$274,736,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WIC</td>
<td>$14,682,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National School Lunch</td>
<td>$25,932,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Breakfast</td>
<td>$7,327,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summer Food Service Program</td>
<td>$656,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>$323,333,000</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Summer Programs Serve Lunches to 5,900 Children
Through the Summer Food Service Program, the USDA provides reimbursement for free meals provided to children at approved sites in low-income communities. These meals are a critical source of food during the summer for children who count on free school meals during the school year. In 2012, there were 198 summer meal sites in Rhode Island, most operating Monday through Friday. Lunches were served to 5,940 children per day in July 2012.12 At this level, summer meals reach less than 12 percent of children receiving free or reduced-price lunches during the school year.
Poor nutrition harms the health of children, adults and seniors. In a multi-site study of over 40,000 families, household food insecurity resulted in poorer health, higher developmental risk and more hospitalizations for children under age four.\textsuperscript{13} In a large scale study of low-income, non-elderly adults, food insecurity was strongly associated with chronic disease.\textsuperscript{14} Other researchers have found that senior adults who are food insecure lack micronutrients and have poorer health than their same-age, food secure peers.\textsuperscript{15}

**All Income Levels Affected by Obesity**

Not having enough food can affect health, but so can too many calories. It is well-accepted that obesity contributes to disease and illness. Obesity-related conditions include Type 2 diabetes, heart disease, stroke and certain types of cancer. These are some of the leading causes of death in the United States. People of all age and income levels are affected by obesity. Since the 1990s, the prevalence of obesity has been rising. In Rhode Island, 26 percent of adults are obese—double the rate from fifteen years ago.\textsuperscript{16}

\begin{center}
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    ylabel={Prevalence of Obesity},
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    yticklabels={0,5,10,15,20,25,30},
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    legend style={nodes={scale=0.8, transform shape}}
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    (2000,17)
    (2005,21)
    (2010,26)
};
\addplot[red,mark=triangle] coordinates{
    (1995,0)
    (2000,5)
    (2005,10)
    (2010,15)
};
\addplot[green,mark=diamond] coordinates{
    (1995,20)
    (2000,25)
    (2005,30)
    (2010,35)
};
\legend{13\%, 17\%, 21\%, 26\%}
\end{axis}
\end{tikzpicture}
\end{center}

**Focus on Prevention**

While the causes of obesity are complex and include multiple genetic and environmental factors, the prevention of obesity is straightforward. In most cases, obesity can be prevented through a healthy diet and regular exercise. The dietary guidelines developed by the USDA recommend reducing calories, adding whole grains and eating more fruits and vegetables.

One of the main barriers to healthy eating for low-income families is the inability to afford adequate food. Shopping on a limited budget leads to purchasing the least expensive item, not necessarily the healthy choice. For example, research shows that low-income families are far less likely than higher-income households to purchase fruits and vegetables.

**Providing Nutritious Food**

The Rhode Island Community Food Bank wants to prevent obesity and promote healthy eating. We strive to provide nutritious food to people receiving food assistance in Rhode Island. Healthy items—including canned vegetables, beans, soup, rice, pasta, cereal, dairy products, fresh fruits and vegetables—make up over 87 percent of the food that we provide to people in need. In fact, of the 9.7 million pounds of food distributed between July 1, 2011 and June 30, 2012, the Food Bank delivered nearly 2 million pounds of fresh produce.

**Empowering People Through Nutrition Education**

This year the Food Bank introduced a new program, *Community Cooking: Wholesome Eating on a Budget*, which brings nutrition education directly to the people who need it most: clients of emergency food programs. The program is held on site at our member agencies and is designed to help their clients create healthier meals on a tight budget, with a focus on balance, moderation and variety. The Food Bank’s approach is based on a successful pilot program, Raising the Bar on Nutrition (RTB), created by Mary Flynn, Chief Research Dietition at the Miriam Hospital and Associate Professor of Medicine at Brown University. Community Cooking focuses on four key areas:

- Nutrition (following the USDA’s guidelines for healthy eating)
- Healthy Cooking
- Food Safety
- Food Budgeting

B arbara Kalil and John Freitas completed the 8-week Community Cooking class offered by the Rhode Island Community Food Bank at the Salvation Army on Broad Street. Formerly homeless, John and Barbara now live independently. They wanted to improve their health, stick to a budget and show other homeless friends that it could be done.

“Ignorance is the biggest enemy for a homeless person,” said John. “I always equated eating healthy with spending a lot of money. I’m finding out that brown rice is very good—it’s what you put into it—the vegetables.”

“It’s so hard for anybody, but especially someone who’s homeless, to treat yourself in a kind way.” said Barbara. “It’s hard to think that you’re worthy of eating fresh foods. We’ve learned you can shop sensibly and eat well.”
Farm Bill Stalled in Congress

The Farm Bill is a comprehensive piece of legislation that authorizes funding for federal farm and food programs, including SNAP. With the 2008 Farm Bill due to expire on September 30, 2012, the Senate and House each offered new versions of the bill this year. Unfortunately, Congress was unable to agree on a final Farm Bill before the deadline and may not vote on the bill until 2013.

Proposed Cuts to SNAP
Both the Senate and House versions of the Farm Bill reduce SNAP funding. Members of Congress were reacting to the dramatic growth in SNAP over the past five years when its annual expense in the federal budget doubled from $37 billion to $75 billion. The program costs more primarily because it is serving more Americans, 46 million today up from 28 million in 2008. SNAP is designed so that more families qualify for benefits in tough economic times, and then enrollment is expected to return to pre-recession levels when the economy fully recovers. Nevertheless, the Senate cut SNAP spending by $4 billion over 10 years, reducing SNAP benefits for approximately 500,000 households by $90 per month. The House makes these same cuts and, in addition, ends benefits for 1.8 million Americans, mainly low-income working families. The House proposal chops SNAP spending by $16 billion over ten years.\(^{19}\)

Reduced Benefits Would Impact Rhode Island Economy
If the House version of the Farm Bill is enacted, 12,200 Rhode Islanders will lose eligibility and up to 30,000 enrolled households will have their benefits reduced by $90 per month.\(^{20}\) Whereas SNAP benefits to Rhode Islanders totaled $275 million last year, the House would lower SNAP spending in Rhode Island by approximately $50 million per year. This reduction would impact Rhode Island’s economy while making it more challenging for thousands of Rhode Islanders to put food on the table.

Potential Impact of the Farm Bill on Rhode Island

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Proposed Changes</th>
<th>Farm Bill Proposal (House version)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>National Impact</td>
<td>Benefits reduced for 500,000 households and 1.8 million people cut from the program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Savings for Federal Budget</td>
<td>$16 billion over ten years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impact on Rhode Islanders</td>
<td>Benefits reduced for up to 30,000 households and 12,200 individuals cut from the program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impact on Federal SNAP Spending in RI</td>
<td>Loss of $50 million per year (18 percent)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Endnotes
Three years after the official end of the Great Recession, the Rhode Island economy remains anemic. The number of employed Rhode Islanders has declined sharply, and the state has the second highest unemployment rate in the country. People who have been jobless for months are now losing their unemployment benefits and their only source of income.

Without work or enough income, thousands of Rhode Island households are unable to afford adequate food. In record numbers they are turning to government and charitable food assistance programs. Each month, 66,000 people are served at food pantries that receive supplies from the Rhode Island Community Food Bank. But food donations are down, so the Food Bank now must raise more money to purchase food in order to keep up with the statewide need. The Food Bank’s strategic plan anticipates a growing gap between the supply and demand for donated food over the next three years.

The Food Bank’s strategic plan anticipates a growing gap between the supply and demand for donated food over the next three years.

Another result of the Great Recession is that more Rhode Island families are eligible for federal nutrition programs. State workers, managing enormous caseloads, play a critical role in helping eligible families receive SNAP, WIC, school meals and summer meals. Along with preventing hunger, these programs bring millions of federal dollars to Rhode Island, directly benefitting local supermarkets, grocery stores and schools.

As a state, we must advocate to stop Congress from weakening the nutrition safety net.

Unfortunately, Congress is proposing to slash SNAP by reducing benefits and limiting eligibility in the Farm Bill. These cuts will increase food insecurity and hunger in Rhode Island at a time when charitable programs are already at capacity. As a state, we must advocate to stop Congress from weakening the nutrition safety net.

**Action Steps**

- Urge Members of Congress to re-work the Farm Bill and protect thousands of Rhode Island households from harmful cuts to SNAP.
- Hire more SNAP caseworkers to reduce caseloads and improve customer service at DHS offices.
- Increase state funding for the Food Bank to meet the high demand at food pantries.
- Offer hands-on nutrition education at food pantries throughout the state.
- Conduct outreach at food pantry sites to encourage all eligible families to enroll in WIC and SNAP.
- Ensure that Rhode Island schools receive higher federal payments when they offer healthier meals to students.
- Promote summer meal programs in low-income communities to reach more hungry children.