Congress Plans to Cut Food Assistance as More Rhode Islanders Face Hunger

Congress Proposes Cuts to Key Programs
Congress is prepared to make significant cuts to safety-net programs that thousands of Rhode Islanders rely on. In its 2018 budget resolution, the U.S. House of Representatives voted to decrease federal spending for SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, previously the Food Stamp Program) by one-third or $160 billion over ten years.¹ The budget framework also reduces funding for the National School Lunch and Breakfast Programs and includes nearly $2 trillion in cuts to Medicare and Medicaid.

Under this plan, Rhode Island will lose $90 million in SNAP benefits annually. In addition, instead of operating as a national program, SNAP will be converted into a fixed, lump sum block grant to each state. During the next economic recession or downturn, when more people need food assistance, Rhode Island will be forced to ration these limited SNAP benefits.

Hunger at a New High Level in Rhode Island
The U.S. Census Bureau conducts an annual survey of food security for the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) based on a representative sample of all households. The survey asks about a household’s resources and their access to adequate food, such as relying on low-cost foods, skipping meals, or not eating due to having too little money for food.

MAJOR FINDINGS

- Congress is planning to take away tens of billions of dollars from safety-net programs, including vital health and nutrition programs.
- The prevalence of hunger in Rhode Island is at its highest level in ten years.
- Access to needed benefits was blocked and delayed this year by the defective launch of the State’s new eligibility system.
- The Rhode Island Community Food Bank and its network of member agencies are operating near capacity, serving 57,000 people each month, and cannot possibly compensate for major cuts to federal nutrition programs.

Questions from the USDA Food Security Survey:

- In the last 12 months, were you ever hungry, but didn’t eat, because there wasn’t enough money for food?
- In the last 12 months, were your children ever hungry but you just couldn’t afford more food?
- In the last 12 months, did any of your children ever not eat for a whole day because there wasn’t enough money for food?

The most recent USDA survey found that one in eight Rhode Island households (12.8%) cannot afford adequate food.² Nearly half of these food insecure households reported the most severe conditions associated with hunger. The prevalence of hunger, termed “very low food security” by the USDA, reached 6.1 percent in 2016, affecting 26,800 households.

Rhode Island Households Reporting Very Low Food Security

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year Range</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2004 - 2006</td>
<td>3.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011 - 2013</td>
<td>4.6%</td>
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<tr>
<td>2014 - 2016</td>
<td>6.1%</td>
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Rhode Island households experiencing hunger increased significantly over the past decade.

² 2018 USDA Economic Research Service.
POVERTY PERSISTS in Rhode Island

The rising tide of economic recovery has not lifted Rhode Island’s poor. Rhode Island has the highest rate of poverty in New England (12.8%) with 130,000 people living in households with income below poverty.³

Ten years since the start of the Great Recession, the state’s economy is still not producing the type of jobs that can move families out of poverty and into the middle-class. One third of the jobs created in Rhode Island last year have an annual average wage of just $26,529.⁴

Because many low-wage workers in Rhode Island lack the means to afford basic household expenses, they rely on both government and charitable food assistance to feed their families. SNAP is a critical source of food for low-income households in Rhode Island. Enrollment in SNAP grew dramatically after the recession, peaking in 2013 at 180,357 people.⁵

The Need for Food Assistance Remains High

Reflecting on an improving economy, SNAP enrollment gradually declined over the past few years. However, due to problems with the launch of a new state eligibility system in September 2016, enrollment suddenly decreased to 148,179 by July 2017.

At member agencies of the Rhode Island Community Food Bank, demand for food assistance reached a high point following the recession, similar to SNAP enrollment, and remains far above pre-recession levels today. Currently, the Food Bank’s statewide network of 155 member agencies, including food pantries, meal programs and shelters, serves more than 57,000 people each month.
More Children Receive School Lunch and Breakfast

Federal nutrition programs play an important role in protecting children from hunger. Over the last ten years, participation in the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs increased in Rhode Island.

In 2007, 40 percent of children enrolled in free or reduced-price lunch also received school breakfast. Ten years later, breakfast participation grew to 51 percent, reflecting successful efforts by schools to reduce stigma and barriers, including offering breakfast in the classroom and universal breakfast (free to all students). The process was also streamlined through automatic enrollment of children in SNAP households and through community eligibility (no applications required in high poverty areas).

This school year, the Community Eligibility Program will allow all students in Providence elementary schools to receive free lunch and breakfast meals. But these gains may be short-lived because the U.S. House of Representatives voted to cut funding for Community Eligibility by $1.6 billion over the next ten years.

WIC Enrollment Trends Down

WIC (Special Supplemental Nutrition Education Program for Women, Infants and Children) provides individualized assessments, information on healthy eating, health-care referrals and nutritious foods to low-income pregnant women, new mothers and their children up to age five.

Unlike SNAP and school meals, WIC enrollment decreased over the past ten years in Rhode Island. In 2016, 54 percent of eligible households were enrolled in the program, down from 71 percent in 2007.

Rhode Island is currently implementing eWIC, which will deliver WIC benefits via debit cards rather than paper checks. With this new system, benefits for specific WIC prescriptions are loaded onto a recipient’s debit card to cover the cost of foods such as low-fat milk, whole grain bread, fruits and vegetables. This change should make it easier for recipients to shop and decrease time at the register. To ease implementation and reduce costs, Rhode Island joined a consortium of states already successfully using eWIC.

The Food Bank’s statewide network of member agencies serves 57,000 people each month.
State Computer Problems Hinder SNAP Enrollment

In September 2016, Rhode Island launched RI Bridges, an integrated eligibility system for multiple health and social service programs, including SNAP. It is also referred to as UHIP, the Unified Health Infrastructure Project, and was designed to replace several outdated systems.

Although RI Bridges was created to streamline the application process, serious problems were detected immediately after the launch. Many families had their SNAP benefits delayed and others were terminated from SNAP incorrectly. These problems were compounded by a staff reduction at the Rhode Island Department of Human Services (DHS), which occurred at the same time. People seeking assistance at DHS offices were met with long lines and wait times.

Since the launch of RI Bridges, SNAP enrollment has dropped by over 12 percent, from 169,373 people in July 2016 to 148,179 in July 2017. SNAP enrollment is used to determine eligibility for other nutrition programs, including WIC and schools meals, so these other programs may have been negatively affected as well.

At the beginning of 2017, the State put together a Turn-Around team to fix UHIP and improve the application process. DHS hired additional staff and expanded its call center. The backlog of SNAP applications dropped as a result of this effort, but as recently as October 2017, thousands of unprocessed applications were discovered that had been lost in the system.

Summary

Just as the state’s economy is getting its footing again, Congress is set to dismantle vital programs that support thousands of Rhode Islanders. Cuts to SNAP and school meals will make it harder for low-income families to afford adequate food and result in higher demand for food assistance. Charitable food programs, including the Food Bank and its member agencies, cannot be expected to make up for the loss of millions of dollars in federal benefits. It will take a concerted effort to protect Rhode Islanders from these devastating cuts from Washington.

For Endnotes, please visit the Food Bank website at rifoodbank.org/StatusReport2017
Endnotes

1. *House Resolution 553, United States House of Representatives, October 4, 2017.*


7. *House Resolution 533, op. cit.*

