Thousands of Families Vulnerable to Hunger

Federal nutrition programs and the Food Bank’s statewide network of emergency food programs are all that stand between hunger and food security for thousands of Rhode Islanders who cannot afford adequate food. However, critical food assistance is threatened by cuts proposed in Congress and by declining food donations.

This annual Status Report on Hunger, produced by the Rhode Island Community Food Bank, documents the extent of food insecurity and hunger in the state and recommends ways to address these challenges and strengthen the safety net for struggling families.

Major Findings

- 15.4 percent of Rhode Island households lack the resources to purchase adequate food
- The Food Bank’s statewide network of member agencies provides 1.5 million meals to people in need each month
- Food donations to the Food Bank are down by nearly 2 million pounds
- SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, formerly the Food Stamps Program) benefits were reduced on November 1 for all 180,000 Rhode Islanders currently enrolled in the program and more cuts are expected from Congress

Thousands of Rhode Islanders at Risk

The state’s weak and uneven economic recovery leaves many Rhode Islanders without the means to feed their families, according to a recent report from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). Households that cannot afford adequate food, known as food insecure, grew from 58,000 to 66,500 over the last five years. The prevalence of food insecurity in Rhode Island remains the highest in New England at 15.4 percent.

Working Hard, Earning Less

Many adults who work full-time at low wages struggle to feed their families. Although the Rhode Island economy is showing signs of improvement, working poor families are earning less now than six years ago. The bottom 20 percent of Rhode Island workers (in terms of earnings) have seen a decrease in hourly wages of $1.19, from $11.24 per hour in 2006 to $10.05 per hour in 2012 (adjusted for inflation).
To provide some relief to workers at the bottom of the pay scale, the Rhode Island General Assembly voted to increase the state’s minimum wage two years in a row. Minimum wage increased to $7.75 per hour in 2013 and to $8.00, effective January 2014.

In addition, low-wage workers can claim the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC). The federal EITC, which was designed to provide an incentive to work by offsetting payroll and income taxes, increases with earned income until it reaches a maximum amount and then phases out. When the credit exceeds the amount of taxes owed, the balance is refunded to the taxpayer. In 2011, there were 82,000 federal EITC claims in Rhode Island for an average amount of $2,100. Rhode Island also offers a state EITC, but it is only partially refundable. The average state credit was $120 and the average refund was $82 in 2011.3

**Member Agencies of the Food Bank Provide 18 Million Meals**

The Food Bank’s statewide network includes 178 member agencies. The number of people served by the network has grown significantly from 37,000 in 2008 to 68,000 in 2013 (monthly average for the 12-month period July 1–June 30). Over these years, the number of member agencies has not increased. Remarkably, these same agencies stretched their capacity and increased the number of meals provided annually from 10 million in 2008 to 18 million this year.

**Food Donations Decrease**

Due to improvements in quality and inventory control in the food industry, there is less surplus food available for donation to food banks. At the Rhode Island Community Food Bank, food donations have declined by nearly two million pounds over the last five years. This has created a significant gap in the food supply, with food donations dropping at the same time that the need for food assistance remains at a record-high level.

**Filling the Gap with Food Purchases**

The Food Bank must now purchase food from wholesalers to ensure a continuous supply of food for its member agencies. Food purchases, which are made possible by charitable giving and state funding, account for 29 percent of the Food Bank’s distribution. In order to leverage the best prices and reduce transportation costs, purchases are coordinated with other food banks in New England.

While the trend in food donations presents challenges, it also offers opportunities. Instead of relying on an unpredictable mix of donated food, including snack food, the Food Bank is able to use its purchasing power to select healthier items, including canned vegetables, soup, pasta, rice, beans and cereal. These healthy food items comprise 87 percent of the Food Bank’s total distribution.

**State Funding for the Food Bank**

With demand for food assistance remaining high, many states allocate funding to food banks for food acquisition and purchase. Each year, the Rhode Island General Assembly awards the Food Bank a Community Service Grant, which is a critical source of funding for food. Unfortunately, the grant has been significantly reduced over the last five years. This year’s grant of $172,819 is half the amount awarded to the Food Bank in 2008.

The table below compares Rhode Island to the allocation for food banks in other nearby states:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>State Funding for Food Banks in 2013</th>
<th>Per Capita</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New York</td>
<td>$29,000,000</td>
<td>$1.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Massachusetts</td>
<td>$11,000,000</td>
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<td>New Jersey</td>
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<td>Connecticut</td>
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<td>Rhode Island</td>
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Federal Nutrition Programs Reach More Rhode Islanders in Need

Five federal nutrition programs annually provide over $340 million in funding to Rhode Island: SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program), WIC (the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children), National School Lunch, School Breakfast and Summer Food Service Programs.

SNAP Helps 180,000 Rhode Islanders

Nearly one in four Rhode Island households (101,159 households as of August 2013) is enrolled in SNAP. Participation in the program has increased significantly since 2008 when 44,000 households were enrolled. SNAP is a critical source of food for many working families who qualify for SNAP benefits because their earnings are near or below the federal poverty level. In Rhode Island, 27 percent of SNAP households have earned income from a job.

SNAP Benefits Debated and Cut

This year, Congress debated the Farm Bill, which authorizes funding for agriculture programs and SNAP, and proposed deep cuts to SNAP. If enacted, these cuts would have serious consequences for Rhode Islanders by limiting who is eligible for SNAP benefits, decreasing benefit levels and taking millions of dollars in SNAP spending away from local supermarkets. In 2009, the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) increased SNAP benefit levels to boost food purchases and stimulate the economy. On November 1, 2013, the increases in the stimulus bill expired, resulting in automatic benefit reductions for every Rhode Island household receiving SNAP.

WIC Participation in Rhode Island above National Average

WIC is a prevention program for low-income pregnant women, new mothers, their infants and children up to age five. The program provides breastfeeding support, nutrition education, improved access to health care and vouchers for the purchase of healthy food items at authorized grocery stores and Farmers Markets. In Rhode Island, 27,000 women and children participate in WIC. This is approximately 72 percent of those who are eligible for the program, which exceeds the national participation rate of 63 percent.

More Children Receive School Breakfast

The School Breakfast program has grown in Rhode Island from 20,500 children participating during the 2007–2008 school year to over 30,600 children participating last year. Ranking 38th among the states in 2008, Rhode Island jumped to 22nd in 2013. School breakfast was traditionally served before the morning bell, which made the program inaccessible for many students. Now, school administrators and food service directors have reduced barriers to program participation by serving breakfast in the classroom as part of the regular school day.

Summer Meals Expand

For the 50,500 Rhode Island students who qualify for free or reduced-price school meals, the Summer Food Service Program is a critical source of food when schools are closed. This year, the Food Bank joined with the Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE), United Way 2-1-1, the City of Providence, the USDA and Stop & Shop’s “Our Family Foundation” to find innovative ways to increase program participation. In target low-income communities at the end of the school year, the Food Bank provided 3,575 food boxes, which contained several days’ worth of healthy, kid-friendly food items along with information about summer meal sites. Through this effort and statewide outreach coordinated by RIDE, the Summer Food Service Program served lunches to 6,421 children per day in July 2013, an eight percent increase from the previous year.
### Protect Vulnerable Families

Because of its devastating impact on the economy, the Great Recession has been likened to a severe storm. It was more like a tornado that destroys some homes and leaves others untouched. In the wake of the recession, 20 percent of American households experienced major financial loss. The families who were most affected depleted their savings and other financial resources and can no longer afford basic needs, including food.

In Rhode Island, well-paying jobs that could provide a path toward economic recovery have been in short-supply. Instead, people at the bottom of the pay scale are working harder and earning less. The result is that one in four Rhode Island households receives SNAP benefits and 68,000 people are fed each month at member agencies of the Food Bank.

Sadly, Congress is turning its back on thousands of families in Rhode Island, and millions nationally, that are still in financial distress. Plans to take SNAP benefits away from current recipients will result in greater food insecurity and increased hunger. With federal food assistance reduced and food donations declining, it is imperative for the state to increase funding for the Food Bank so that emergency food programs can continue to serve those in desperate need.

### Action Steps:

- Urge our Congressional Delegation to limit harmful cuts to SNAP
- Increase state funding for the Food Bank to ensure that there is enough food to meet the high demand at food pantries
- Raise the income of working families by making the state Earned Income Tax Credit fully refundable
- Boost school breakfast participation by serving breakfast in the classroom, free-of-charge to all students in low-income communities
- Promote summer meal programs for children at parks and recreation sites to ensure that no child goes hungry when schools are closed

### Endnotes