There is a significant meal gap in Rhode Island today. Low-income families miss out on meals because they cannot afford adequate food. Entire communities remain distressed and are not benefiting from the state’s economic recovery. More should be done to protect low-income families from hunger and bring economic growth to the communities where they live.

Three Healthy Meals Per Day

Thousands of Rhode Islanders cannot afford three healthy meals a day. Even after utilizing government nutrition assistance and charitable food programs, low-income families miss meals. The number of missing meals in Rhode Island – 33.2 million per year – demonstrates the magnitude of the problem.

There are 198,000 Rhode Islanders living in households with incomes below 130 percent of the federal poverty level ($26,208 annually for a family of three). This is the level of poverty that qualifies children for free school meals. For everyone in Rhode Island at this income level to have three meals per day for a year, 217 million meals are needed.

Most low-income households use their own earnings to purchase food. Some use government benefits, including SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) and WIC (Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children) to buy food at supermarkets and grocery stores. Some families also rely on member agencies of the Rhode Island Community Food Bank for emergency food assistance.

Thirty-Three Million Missing Meals

The following graph shows the different sources of meals for low-income households in Rhode Island. Of the total 217 million meals needed annually, 15 percent – 33.2 million – are missing. SNAP, WIC and School Meals account for more than half of the meals provided.

The number of missing meals in Rhode Island – 33.2 million per year – demonstrates the magnitude of the problem.
The Root Cause of Hunger
IS POVERTY

There are many areas of concentrated poverty in Rhode Island. The Distressed Communities Index identifies eight zones of economic hardship in the state based upon poverty, unemployment, median income, housing vacancies, educational achievement and the business environment. The eight identified communities are in Providence, Pawtucket, Central Falls and Woonsocket.

The demand for food assistance is very high in these areas. To meet the need, the Food Bank supplies food to 47 member agencies that operate food pantries, meal programs and shelters in these distressed communities.

The Food Bank’s statewide network of member agencies serves 59,000 people EACH MONTH; one-half of those served live in a distressed community.

29% is the average poverty rate in distressed communities, double the statewide rate of 14%.

235 THOUSAND
Rhode Islanders, more than 1/5 of RI’s population, live in a distressed community.
Eight Distressed Communities

Represented above are the Rhode Island Community Food Bank's member agencies in each distressed area. Reflecting the high need, there are 47 agencies offering emergency food assistance in these communities.
Closing the Meal Gap

A bill recently introduced in Congress, Closing the Meal Gap Act of 2016 (H.R. 5215), addresses the meal gap by raising SNAP benefit levels. It would boost the purchasing power of SNAP recipients by increasing benefit levels to match the actual cost of food in the supermarket. If this bill is enacted, 100,000 Rhode Island households currently enrolled in SNAP would be more food secure and better able to meet their basic food needs.

Until Congress raises SNAP benefit levels, the high demand for emergency food assistance will continue. Meeting the need is a challenge for the Food Bank because food donations from supermarkets have decreased by two million pounds since 2008. The food industry is using more sophisticated inventory controls, which means less surplus food becomes available for donation.

Fortunately, this year’s state budget includes a line-item of $175,000 for the Food Bank to acquire 500,000 pounds of food. More state funding will be needed in the future as food industry trends continue to impact donations.

Aiding Distressed Communities

For most Rhode Islanders, the problem of hunger is hidden out of sight. But in our distressed communities, the lines of people waiting for food assistance are a daily reminder of economic hardship. Along with addressing hunger through federal nutrition programs and charitable food assistance aimed at individuals and families, we should also seek solutions at the community level.

Policies that spur economic development have helped distressed communities in other parts of the country rebound. These efforts require strong local leadership and funding. Fortunately, several of our distressed communities were recently selected to participate in the Working Cities Challenge of the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston, which will fund proposals that promote cross-sector collaboration and engage community members to achieve economic growth.

★ For Endnotes, please visit the Food Bank website at: www.rifoodbank.org/StatusReport2016

2014 Consumer Expenditure Survey, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. On average, low-income individuals spent $2,157 per year ($41.50 per week) to purchase food. This means that $427 million was spent on food by low-income Rhode Islanders, including $283 million in SNAP benefits, $11 million in WIC benefits and $133 million in cash. In market research, Nielsen found that the average cost of a meal in Rhode Island is $2.93, so this population purchased 45.4 million meals with cash.

FY2015 State Activity Report, SNAP, Food and Nutrition Service, USDA. Rhode Island received $283 million in SNAP benefits last year. Based on a cost per meal of $2.93, SNAP benefits purchased 96.6 million meals.

WIC Program: Food Cost, FY2015, Food and Nutrition Service, USDA. Rhode Island received $11 million in WIC benefits last year. Given a cost per meal of $2.93, WIC benefits purchased 3.8 million meals.

Child Nutrition, FY2015 State Level Tables, Food and Nutrition Service, USDA.

The Rhode Island Community Food Bank requires its member agencies to report the number of meals provided monthly. In the twelve month period, July 2015 through June 2016, 19 million meals were provided by these agencies across the state.

The 2016 Distressed Communities Index, Economic Innovation Group: eig.org/dci

FY2015 State Activity Report, SNAP, Food and Nutrition Service, USDA.

Working Cities Challenge, Federal Reserve Bank of Boston, 2016: bostonfed.org/workingcities