Despite recent signs of an improved economy, 54,000 Rhode Island households do not have the resources to purchase adequate food. It remains critically important for government programs and community-based organizations to provide increased access to healthy food for these families, with a focus on children and the elderly who are the most severely harmed by hunger.

**Major Findings**

- One in eight Rhode Island households lacks adequate food.
- Before the recession, member agencies of the Rhode Island Community Food Bank served 33,000 people each month. Now, this same network serves 60,000 people each month.
- 174,000 Rhode Islanders are enrolled in SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program), double the number from before the recession.
- Hunger has severe consequences for our most vulnerable citizens: children and the elderly poor.

**Food Insecurity among All Rhode Island Households**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>% of Rhode Island Households</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2002–2004</td>
<td>12.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009–2011</td>
<td>15.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012–2014</td>
<td>12.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Thousands Struggle to Put Food on the Table**

According to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), 12.7 percent of Rhode Island households (54,000 households) were food insecure over the three-year period 2012–2014. Of these households, 20,000 report the most severe conditions associated with hunger. The rate of food insecurity has declined since reaching its peak immediately after the recession, yet thousands of families continue to struggle to meet their basic food needs. As a state, we must take full advantage of a wide-range of effective solutions that reduce food insecurity and provide relief to families facing hunger.
Child Hunger

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 41,000 Rhode Island children live in poverty. Growing up in poverty can have a profound and lasting effect on children. It puts them at high risk for hunger, which in turn threatens their development, learning and health. Ending poverty is the long-term answer, but hungry children can’t wait. There is an urgent need to expand and enhance programs that feed children where they live, learn and play.

Causes of Child Hunger

• **Poverty**: One in five children under age 18 in Rhode Island lives in poverty, the highest rate in New England.\(^2\)

• **Cost of Living**: Food insecure families frequently must choose between paying the rent or buying food. The fair market rent for a two-bedroom apartment in Rhode Island is $928, more than half the income of a full-time minimum wage worker.\(^3\)

Consequences of Child Hunger

• **Health**: Young children living in food insecure households are more likely to be in poor health and hospitalized than children in homes with adequate food.\(^4\)

• **Learning**: Nutritional risk in children is associated with low grades and behavioral problems at school.\(^5\)

Programs that Address Child Hunger

**SNAP**
SNAP has been shown to reduce food insecurity among families with children.\(^6\) Of the 174,000 Rhode Islanders enrolled in SNAP,\(^7\) 35 percent are children.\(^8\)

**WIC**
In Rhode Island, 19,600 young children are enrolled in WIC (Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children).\(^9\) WIC is a public health program that provides health-care referrals, information on healthy eating and nutritious foods for low-income pregnant women, new mothers and their children up to age five who have been found to be at nutritional risk.

**School Meals**
50,870 children receive free or reduced-price lunch at school; 31,770 children also participate in the School Breakfast Program.\(^10\)

**Afterschool Meals**
Meals and snacks are served to children in afterschool programs with reimbursement through the federal Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP).

**Emergency Food Assistance**
Member agencies of the Food Bank provide food assistance to more than 60,000 people each month; one-third of those served are children.

**Summer Meals**
The Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) makes it possible for camps and recreation programs to serve meals to children in low-income neighborhoods during the school vacation. Last summer, the City of Providence in cooperation with Newport, Central Falls, the Rhode Island Department of Education, United Way 2-1-1 and the Food Bank, conducted an innovative outreach and marketing campaign, which increased participation in summer meals by 11 percent over the previous year, reaching 10,700 children.\(^11\)
Senior Hunger

Seniors are a growing part of the Rhode Island population, among them an increasing number of elderly poor. Not having enough money for food can be life-threatening for older adults, but access to food assistance can be complicated by limited mobility and poor health. To address these barriers to adequate nutrition, we must fully support programs that are effective at reaching high-risk seniors.

Causes of Senior Hunger

- **Poverty:** 9.7 percent of Rhode Islanders over age 65 live in poverty; 7,000 seniors live on Supplemental Security Income benefits of just $773 per month.

- **Cost of Living:** Social Security and Supplemental Security Income have not increased to keep up with the rising cost of food, which is expected to continue to grow annually by 2 to 3 percent.

Consequences of Senior Hunger

- **Health:** Among senior adults, food insecurity is linked to poor health, chronic illness and lower cognitive functioning.

- **Independence:** Food insecurity is associated with limitations in independent living skills, such as dressing, bathing and cooking.

Programs that Address Senior Hunger

**SNAP**

In Rhode Island, 13 percent of those enrolled in SNAP are senior adults. While most SNAP households must recertify every twelve months to stay enrolled, seniors who live on a fixed income only need to complete this paperwork every two years.

**Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP)**

Through this federal program, newly available in Rhode Island, low-income seniors are able to receive USDA commodity food. The food is distributed by the Food Bank in cooperation with the Rhode Island Division of Elderly Affairs.

**Meals on Wheels**

2,300 homebound seniors are served by Meals on Wheels of Rhode Island, which delivers meals each day, Monday through Friday. In 2015, the Rhode Island General Assembly increased funding for Meals on Wheels by $330,000, which will allow the program to provide approximately 13,000 additional meals, including weekend meal service.

**Emergency Food Assistance**

20 percent of those served by member agencies of the Food Bank are age 60 or older; approximately 12,000 seniors receive food assistance each month.

**Senior Dining Program**

55 sites in Rhode Island, known as Cafés, provide lunch-time meals to adults over 60, regardless of their ability to pay. Last year, these sites served over 300,000 meals.

**Senior Farmers’ Market Nutrition Program**

This program distributes coupons at senior centers for the purchase of fresh produce at Farmers’ Markets. Last year, Rhode Island received $250,000 from the USDA to issue 50,000 coupons.
Take Action to End Hunger

The recession that devastated the Rhode Island economy has not been followed by a robust recovery. Sluggish economic growth over the past eight years has replaced some jobs that were lost in the recession, but wages have remained stagnant. People stuck in low-wage or part-time jobs often don’t earn enough to make ends meet. And still today, 30,000 Rhode Islanders are unemployed.21 As a result, one in eight Rhode Island households finds themselves unable to afford adequate food.

In the past, those faced with empty cupboards at home would rely on family members and friends for help. But the impact of the recession in Rhode Island was so broad and deep that many families now don’t have the extra reserves to help their loved ones. Without anywhere else to turn, people in need seek help from member agencies of the Food Bank. Each month, 60,000 people receive food assistance at these agencies across the state.

With demand for food assistance remaining high, federal nutrition programs are an essential source of meals for low-income families. In particular, these programs protect children and seniors from the harm caused by hunger. This year, the USDA’s Commodity Supplemental Food Program, which provides monthly food boxes to low-income seniors, expanded to Rhode Island and six other states. By implementing this new program and increasing state funding for Meals on Wheels, Rhode Island is taking critical steps toward ending senior hunger.

By contrast, this fall, Congress allowed the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 to lapse and failed to reauthorize child nutrition programs including School Lunch, School Breakfast, Summer Food Service and WIC. While these programs remain temporarily funded, Congress missed an opportunity to improve and expand these programs to reach more hungry children. It is now time for Congress to act on this legislation and make much needed investments toward preventing child hunger.

By fully implementing effective nutrition programs and reaching those most in need, we can ensure that no one in Rhode Island goes hungry.

Action Steps

Hunger is a problem that we can solve. By fully implementing effective nutrition programs and reaching those most in need, we can ensure that no one in Rhode Island goes hungry. To accomplish this goal, we need Rhode Islanders to join us in calling for the following policy changes:

• Advocate for Congress to reauthorize the child nutrition programs that provide healthy, nutritious food to low-income children and families.
• Increase SNAP benefit levels to keep up with the rising cost of food.
• Allocate additional state funding for the Food Bank to meet the continued high demand for food assistance.
• Raise the state’s Earned Income Tax Credit to boost the incomes of working families.
• Offer free school breakfast and lunch to all students in high-poverty communities.

For Endnotes, please visit the Food Bank website at rifoodbank.org/StatusReport2015.
Endnotes


3 *Out of Reach 2014*, National Low Income Housing Coalition, 2014.


7 *Total SNAP Participation*, Rhode Island Department of Human Services, 2015.


11 *Summer Food Service Program Participation*, Rhode Island Department of Education, 2015.


13 *SSI Recipients by State and County*, Social Security Administration, 2015.


16 Ibid.


19 *Senior Dining Program report*, Division of Elderly Affairs, Rhode Island Department of Human Services, 2015.

20 *Senior Farmers’ Market Nutrition Program Grant Amounts*, USDA, 2015.