



# 2014 Status Report on Hunger in Rhode Island

## Thousands of Families Left Behind in Recovery



The economic recovery taking root in Rhode Island has not reached thousands of low-income families who rely on food programs to avoid hunger. Food insecurity remains unacceptably high. A large portion of our population still doesn't have reliable access to affordable, healthy food to feed their families. Poor nutrition continues to impair the health of our children and elderly.

### Major Findings

- One in seven Rhode Island households cannot afford adequate food.
- The Rhode Island Community Food Bank must purchase three million pounds of food each year to meet the persistently high need.
- 22 percent of those served at member agencies of the Food Bank have a family member in poor health.
- The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is a critical resource for low-income families, but benefit levels are inadequate to feed a family throughout the month.

### Hunger Continues at Near-Record High

The level of hunger and food insecurity in Rhode Island today remains nearly as high as it was at the peak of the recession. From 2008 to 2010, 14.7 percent of Rhode Island households were food insecure and unable to meet their basic food needs. From 2011 to 2013, the rate of food insecurity declined slightly to 14.4 percent.<sup>1</sup> According to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), one in seven Rhode Island households still cannot afford adequate food, and 19,400 households report the most severe conditions associated with hunger.

### Families Make Difficult Choices

High levels of food insecurity persist in Rhode Island because thousands of families are struggling to get by on extremely limited incomes. This reality was confirmed by the 2014 Hunger in America study, conducted by Feeding America, the nationwide network of food banks. The Rhode Island Community Food Bank participated actively in the study, surveying hundreds of people at food pantries and meal sites across the state.

The study found that most people receiving food assistance in Rhode Island were living in poverty and had to choose between paying for food and paying for other essentials.<sup>2</sup>

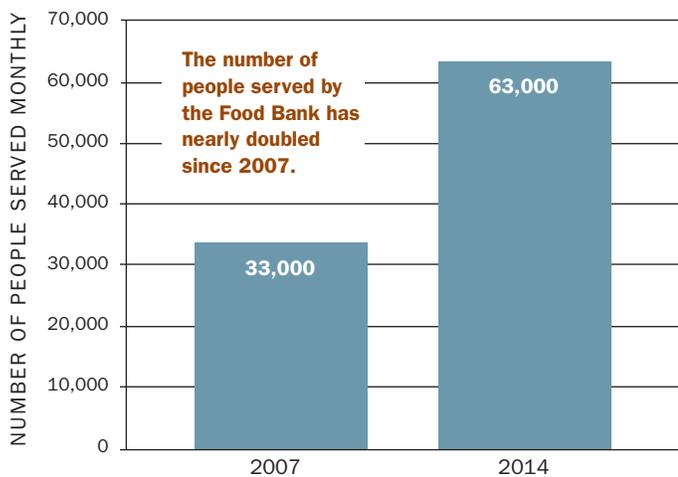
Over the course of a year:

- 70% had to choose between paying for utilities or buying food.
- 68% had to choose between paying for medicine or buying food.
- 67% had to choose between paying for transportation or buying food.
- 62% had to choose between paying for housing or buying food.

One way that families cope with these spending trade-offs is to lower food costs by seeking charitable food assistance at food pantries and meal sites. Today, the Rhode Island Community Food Bank's statewide network of 169 member agencies serves 63,000 people each month. In 2007, the same number of agencies served 33,000 people.



## People Served by the Food Bank



**The continued high demand for food assistance makes it challenging for the Food Bank to acquire enough healthy food to stock food pantries across the state.**

### Food Bank Focuses on Fresh, Healthy Food

Last year, the Food Bank distributed 9.9 million pounds of food, including more than 2 million pounds of fresh produce. Currently, 89 percent of the food distributed is highly nutritious “core” food that can be used to make a healthy meal for a family.

The continued high demand for food assistance makes it challenging for the Food Bank to acquire enough healthy food to stock food pantries across the state. Donated food is not sufficient in quantity or quality to provide nutritious meals for 63,000 people per month. In 2014, the Food Bank received 6 million pounds of donated food versus 7.2 million pounds in 2007. We do not expect the quantity of donated food to increase. Greater efficiency in the food industry means less surplus or unsaleable food available for donation.

The Food Bank now purchases more than 3 million pounds of food each year to meet the statewide need. Strategic purchasing of healthy items has enabled the Food Bank to improve the overall quality of food distributed to our member agencies.

### Vulnerable Populations at High Risk

Food insecurity is particularly harmful to the health of young children and senior adults who require adequate nutrition every day. Among households receiving food assistance in Rhode Island, 22 percent reported having a family member in poor health.<sup>3</sup>

Children’s HealthWatch found that children living in food insecure families were significantly more likely to be hospitalized than those in food secure homes.<sup>4</sup> Similar studies of food insecurity among seniors link illness and poor health to insufficient food.<sup>5</sup>

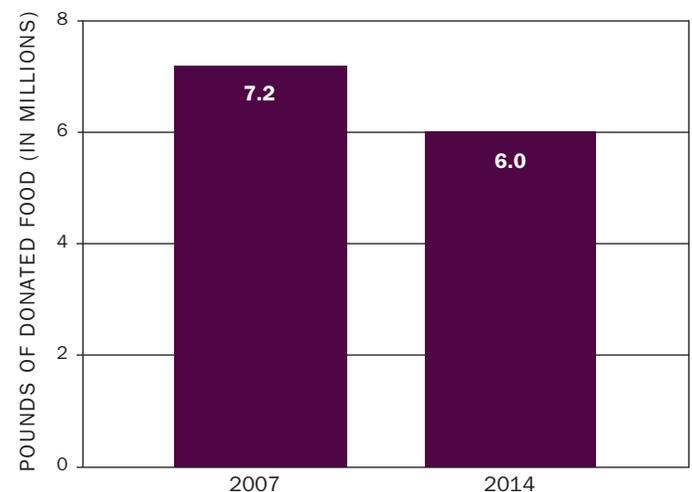


### Support for Children and Senior Adults

Throughout the year, the Food Bank provides nutritious food to families with children and senior adults at food pantries across the state. In addition, the Food Bank has several special initiatives for children and senior adults aimed at improving nutrition and health:

- Kids Cafe serves nutritious evening meals to children at after-school programs in low-income communities.
- Meals4Kids provides boxes packed with healthy, kid-friendly food items to families with children during school vacations, including summer, when children miss out on school meals.
- Senior boxes is a pilot program that distributes nutritious food to elderly individuals at senior centers and low-income housing sites. Participants are also offered nutrition education, cooking demonstration classes and assistance applying for SNAP benefits.

### Donated Food Drops Significantly



**The amount of food donated to the Rhode Island Community Food Bank has dropped by 1.2 million pounds since 2007.**

# Access to Federal Nutrition Programs Is Critical

Five federal nutrition programs provide millions of meals to low-income Rhode Islanders: 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. These programs also boost the local economy by bringing \$360 million per year in federal funding to Rhode Island.<sup>6</sup>

## SNAP Outreach Loses State Funding

The Rhode Island General Assembly failed to allocate state funds for the SNAP Outreach Project at the University of Rhode Island in 2014. The SNAP Outreach Project identifies eligible families and helps them apply for SNAP benefits. Between 2009 and 2013, SNAP participation among clients of emergency food programs in Rhode Island increased significantly from 57 percent to 82 percent, demonstrating the effectiveness of SNAP outreach.<sup>7</sup> With state funding eliminated, Rhode Islanders eligible for SNAP will have more difficulty accessing this federally funded program in the future.

Today, SNAP is a critical resource for more than 176,000 people in Rhode Island, a significant increase from 2007, when 76,000 were enrolled.<sup>8</sup> However, SNAP benefit levels are based on the USDA's Thrifty Food Plan, an unrealistically sparse diet. The adequacy of SNAP to purchase a healthy diet was further eroded by across-the-board benefit cuts that were made in November 2013. Now, the average monthly SNAP benefit is \$251 for a Rhode Island household,<sup>9</sup> which many families exhaust by the third week of the month. This is when Rhode Islanders turn to the Food Bank's member agencies for help.

## Program for Women and Children Becomes More User-Friendly

The Special Supplemental Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) is transitioning from a paper check system to an electronic benefit transfer system, which will be easier for both recipients and the businesses where they shop.

WIC provides nutritious foods, information on healthy eating and health-care referrals for low-income pregnant women, new mothers and their children up to age five. In Rhode Island, the program reaches 66 percent of the 40,000 women and children who are eligible to participate.<sup>10</sup> Benefits help women acquire healthy food items at authorized grocery stores and farmers markets, with the goal of promoting optimal child development. The average monthly food benefit per person in Rhode Island is \$46.<sup>11</sup>

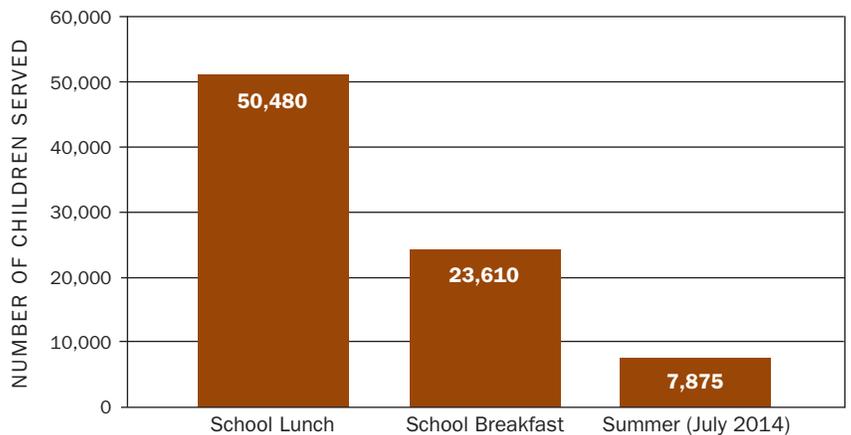
## Breakfast as Part of the School Day

More children are now receiving school breakfast in Rhode Island through the federal School Breakfast Program. All children who are eligible for free or reduced-price school lunch are also able to receive school breakfast in Rhode Island. Currently, 50,480 kids participate in free or reduced-price lunch. When breakfast is served before the school day begins, participation is limited to children who can arrive at school early. Recently, many schools have begun offering breakfast in the classroom at the start of the school day.

In October 2013, an average of 28,060 students participated in the breakfast program.<sup>12</sup> Among children eligible for free or reduced-price meals, 48 percent (23,610 children) received breakfast, as compared to 40 percent in 2007–2008.<sup>13</sup>

Participation could further increase through Community Eligibility, a new federal option that allows schools in high-poverty areas to serve meals to all students at no charge and eliminate paper applications for free or reduced-price meals.

## Child Nutrition Programs Have Room to Grow



This chart shows the current average daily participation in the National School Lunch, School Breakfast and Summer Food Service Programs among Rhode Island children who are eligible for free or reduced-price meals.

## Summer Meals Reach More Children

In 2014, a campaign was launched to boost participation in the Summer Food Service Program. The program provides summer meals for children who rely on free lunch and breakfast during the school year. In July 2014 alone, 7,875 children received lunch every day, an increase of 21 percent over July 2013.<sup>14</sup>

Much of this increase occurred in Providence, thanks to a successful outreach effort by the City's Healthy Communities Office in cooperation with the Rhode Island Department of Education, United Way 2-1-1 and the Rhode Island Community Food Bank. To promote the program, the Food Bank's member agencies distributed 4,000 Meals4Kids boxes containing kid-friendly food items and information about available summer meal sites, funded by a grant from Stop & Shop's "Our Family Foundation."

# Help for Hungry Families Remains Urgent

As Rhode Island's economy recovers from the recession, thousands of families are still unable to meet their basic needs. The record-high levels of food insecurity and hunger experienced during the height of the recession remain virtually unchanged. Families with limited income and few resources face impossible choices between paying for food and paying for rent, utilities, medicine or transportation.

Each month, 63,000 Rhode Islanders receive food assistance at member agencies of the Food Bank. These charitable programs strive to serve everyone who turns to them for help, but food donations are not sufficient to meet the need.

The Food Bank must purchase more than 3 million pounds of food per year to ensure a consistent, reliable supply of food.

Unless the needy are to be turned away when the food runs out, the Rhode Island General Assembly must increase its funding for the Food Bank.

Last year, the state created HealthSource RI to expand health coverage through the Affordable Care Act. Many uninsured Rhode Islanders were able to enroll in health coverage for the first time. But this important investment in healthcare is being undermined by high levels of food insecurity and hunger that threaten the health of our most vulnerable citizens.

To protect low-income families from hunger and poor health, we must strengthen the nutrition safety net and federal nutrition programs that make food affordable.

## Action Steps

We urge Rhode Islanders to advocate at the state and national level for the following steps to prevent hunger and safeguard the health and well-being of thousands of Rhode Island families.

- Increase state funding to the Food Bank for the purchase of nutritious food.
- Raise SNAP benefits to reflect the real cost of food and ensure that low-income families have enough to eat through the entire month.
- Restore state funding for the SNAP Outreach Project to help eligible Rhode Islanders receive these critical food benefits.
- Adopt the Community Eligibility option to offer free school meals to all students in high-poverty areas.
- Boost school breakfast participation in low-income communities by serving breakfast in the classroom as a regular part of the school day.

## Endnotes

- 1 Coleman-Jensen, A., Gregory, C. and Singh, A., *Household Food Security in the United States in 2013*, Economic Research Service, USDA, 2014.
- 2 *Hunger in America 2014: Food Bank Report for Rhode Island Community Food Bank*, Feeding America, 2014.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Cook, J.T. and Frank, D.A., *Food Security, Poverty, and Human Development in the United States*, Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences, 2008.
- 5 Ziliak, J.P. and Gundersen, C., *The Health Consequences of Senior Hunger in the United States: Evidence from the 1999-2010 NHANES*, National Foundation to End Senior Hunger, 2014.
- 6 *Program Benefits*, Food and Nutrition Service, USDA, 2014.
- 7 *Hunger in America 2014: Food Bank Report for Rhode Island Community Food Bank*, Feeding America, 2014.
- 8 *Total SNAP Participation*, Rhode Island Department of Human Services, 2014.
- 9 *SNAP: Average Monthly Benefit per Household*, Food and Nutrition Service, USDA, 2014.
- 10 *Women and Children Participating in WIC*, 2014 Rhode Island KIDS COUNT Factbook, Rhode Island KIDS COUNT, 2014.
- 11 *WIC Program: Average Monthly Benefit per Person*, Food and Nutrition Service, USDA, 2014.
- 12 *School Meals Participation*, Rhode Island Department of Education, 2014.
- 13 *School Breakfast Scorecard 2008*, Food Research and Action Center, 2009.
- 14 *Summer Food Service Program Participation*, Rhode Island Department of Education, 2014.



### Rhode Island Community Food Bank

200 Niantic Avenue  
Providence, RI 02907

Phone: 401-942-6325

Fax: 401-942-2328

Website: [www.rifoodbank.org](http://www.rifoodbank.org)

Facebook: [www.facebook.com/RICFB](https://www.facebook.com/RICFB)

Twitter: [twitter.com/RIFoodBank](https://twitter.com/RIFoodBank)

**Mission** The Rhode Island Community Food Bank provides food to people in need and promotes long-term solutions to the problem of hunger.

**Vision** The Food Bank is an innovative leader in solving the problem of hunger. In partnership with our member agencies, as well as government and community leaders, we work to ensure that no one in Rhode Island goes hungry. We envision a day when everyone in Rhode Island has access to nutritious food through an efficient and sustainable acquisition and distribution network.