The Rhode Island Community Food Bank annually produces the Status Report to document the extent of food insecurity and hunger in the state. When an individual or family is food insecure, worry exists about the next meal. Food insecure households do not have enough money to purchase adequate food and are at high risk of going hungry. This 2010 Status Report examines the current economic conditions that contribute to food insecurity, the critical role of emergency food assistance and the utilization of government sponsored nutrition programs. The Report recommends ways to end the growing problem of hunger in Rhode Island.

**Major Findings of the Report**

- As a result of the prolonged economic recession that began two years ago, thousands of Rhode Island families are in financial crisis, having lost jobs and savings.
- The prevalence of food insecurity in Rhode Island is 13.7 percent, affecting 58,000 households.
- Emergency food assistance and SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) benefits reach record numbers of people and help cushion the blow of the recession.
- Additional steps should be taken to improve access to nutritious meals for people in need. For example, by serving breakfast in the classroom at the start of the day, schools can feed many more hungry children.

**Unemployment and Poverty in Rhode Island**

The torpid economic recovery has barely reached low-income communities in Rhode Island. For the past three years, Rhode Island has had the highest unemployment rate in New England. Approximately 66,000 people look for work, but are unable to find jobs. The numbers of jobless have more than doubled since September 2007.

In addition to unemployed individuals, many others are either underemployed or so discouraged that they have stopped looking for work. Underemployment is particularly acute among the poor who have been more adversely affected than other income groups by the deep deterioration in the job market.

With severe declines in jobs and wages, more Rhode Islanders are living in poverty. The poverty rate jumped from 10 percent in 2007 to 12.9 percent in 2009.
Growing Demand for Emergency Food Assistance
The number of people served monthly at emergency food pantries in Rhode Island grew by 17,000 over the last three years. These programs feed 55,000 people each month. Most are living in poverty, dealing with severe financial hardships and struggling to avoid hunger. Of all households served, four out of ten are families with children.\textsuperscript{4}

![People Served at Rhode Island Food Pantries](chart.png)

*Demand for food assistance increased by 45 percent between 2007 and 2010 in Rhode Island*

The Food Bank Responds
The Rhode Island Community Food Bank distributes food to 121 food pantries that give out bags of groceries and to 25 programs that prepare hot meals. During this period of skyrocketing need, the number of emergency food programs in Rhode Island has not increased; existing programs are simply serving more people. In a recent survey, 80 percent of emergency food programs report serving significantly more clients than four years ago.\textsuperscript{5}

In response to the higher demand, the Rhode Island Community Food Bank surpassed previous levels of food assistance during the 12-month period of September 2009 through August 2010 and distributed 9.8 million pounds. Emergency food programs in Rhode Island also received more food from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). Through the 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA), the state received an additional $350,000 to acquire USDA food. However, these extra economic stimulus funds will not be available in the coming year. Also, supermarkets and grocery stores are limiting the amount of food donations because of more efficient inventory control and salvage operations.

The Food Bank Network of Member Agencies

The Food Bank distributes food to 257 sites in Rhode Island through its network of Member Agencies, including emergency food pantries, meal programs, shelters, transitional housing, group homes, senior centers, day care and afterschool programs. The number indicated for each city or town is the total number of sites in that location.
Prevalence of Food Insecurity and Hunger

Food insecurity in a family occurs when the household lacks enough nutritious food to keep every member active and healthy. Being food insecure means family members cut the size of meals, skip meals and eventually experience hunger when the household runs out of food. According to the latest report from the USDA, 13.7 percent of households in Rhode Island were food insecure in 2009. The prevalence of food insecurity and hunger is at the highest level in a decade.

According to the latest report from the USDA, 13.7 percent of households in Rhode Island were food insecure in 2009. The prevalence of food insecurity and hunger is at the highest level in a decade.

CALLING FOR HELP

Struggling families can call United Way 2-1-1 in Rhode Island to find out where to turn for help. In the 12-month period, September 2009 to August 2010, the 2-1-1 helpline received 163,000 calls, 45 percent more than the previous year, including 41,000 calls for food assistance. Sam’s story (not his real name) is not uncommon:

Sam was laid off at age 50 after working his whole adult life as a carpenter. Recently, his unemployment benefits ran out and his caseworker at the Department of Labor and Training suggested he call 2-1-1. Sam was ashamed to ask for any assistance, but he made the call. The information referral specialist who answered Sam’s call reassured him that no one was judging him. Without any income, Sam certainly needed help now. During the call, the 2-1-1 specialist explained to Sam that he was eligible for SNAP benefits and how to apply. Sam was also referred to a local food pantry. One month later, Sam dialed 2-1-1 again. This time, he happily explained that he was back at work. He was just calling to say thanks for all the help he received.
Solutions that Work: Serving School Breakfast in the Classroom

Too many children come to school hungry in Rhode Island. Hunger and poor nutrition have been linked to lower grades, behavior problems and high absenteeism. As every teacher knows, a child cannot learn on an empty stomach.

The School Breakfast Program is a solution to child hunger and a boost to learning. Rhode Island requires all public schools to offer breakfast. But some school districts go one step further, providing meals free of charge to all students, which is a program known as Universal School Breakfast. Breakfast meals are reimbursed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), with Rhode Island schools receiving over $5.5 million annually from the federal government for School Breakfast.7

While approximately 51,000 Rhode Island children receive free or reduced-price school lunch, far fewer participate in the School Breakfast Program.8 In the 2007-2008 school year, 20,600 low-income students (average per day) received School Breakfast, while only 19,500 participated in the program during the 2008-2009 school year.9 Because only four children receive breakfast for every ten that receive free or reduced-price lunch, Rhode Island ranks 41st in the country for School Breakfast utilization.

In most schools, breakfast is still served during the hour before school starts. School administrators are focused on instructional time and often worry that breakfast served as part of the school day will interrupt the educational routine. But principals and food service directors in some Rhode Island school districts have come up with creative ways to facilitate the transition from eating to learning by serving breakfast in the classroom at the start of the school day.

School Breakfast Excellence Awards Increase Participation

In order to encourage schools to improve access to School Breakfast, the Rhode Island Community Food Bank, together with Kids First—the organization working for better nutrition for Rhode Island children—issued School Breakfast Excellence Awards in cooperation with the Rhode Island Department of Education and the Providence-based company, United Natural Foods (UNFI). To earn the $1,000 award, a school must serve breakfast to at least half of its enrolled students, while meeting the state’s nutrition requirements. Only public schools in which at least 40 percent of lunches are served to free or reduced-price eligible children were able to apply for an award.

During the 2009-2010 school year, nineteen schools in five districts qualified for an award and collectively added 1,375 students to the School Breakfast Program over the previous school year. Schools that serve breakfast in the classroom achieved the highest levels of participation, over 70 percent.
## School Breakfast Excellence Award Winners and Student Participation

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<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td>7691</td>
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*Each of these schools achieved over 50 percent participation in the School Breakfast Program in the 2009–2010 School Year to earn the Food Bank’s School Breakfast Excellence Award.*
Federal Nutrition Programs

Before the end of 2010, Congress is expected to vote to reauthorize and raise funding levels for critical child nutrition programs including WIC (the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children), School Breakfast, School Lunch, the Summer Food Service Program and Afterschool Meals. Proposed program improvements include replacing WIC coupons with EBT (electronic benefits transfer) cards, streamlining the application process for free school meals and updating federal reimbursement for School Breakfast and Lunch. Rhode Island recently raised nutrition standards for school meals through the Rhode Island Nutrition Requirements. When enacted, the new level of federal reimbursement will help Rhode Island schools keep up with the cost of providing these healthier meals.

WIC

WIC is a federally funded public health program for low-income pregnant women, new mothers, infants and children up to age five. WIC participants receive a nutrition assessment, counseling and vouchers for the purchase of specific, nutrient-rich foods. WIC also offers the Farmers’ Market Nutrition Program, which helps clients purchase locally grown produce from June to October. The average monthly benefit is $43 per person in the household.10

By providing critical nutrition assistance and education, WIC decreases the risk of hunger, health problems and developmental delays for young children. The average monthly caseload in Rhode Island, approximately 28,000 program participants, has not grown during the recession, but there is the capacity to increase. WIC is currently serving about 73 percent of the estimated eligible population.11

SCHOOL LUNCH

The National School Lunch Program provides free and reduced-price lunches to eligible children. At the state level, the program is administered by the Rhode Island Department of Education, which oversees the application process. While most parents must complete and submit an application form, children from families enrolled in SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) are automatically eligible for free meals.

When Congress reapproves the program this year, schools will additionally be able to use Medicaid enrollment data to directly certify children for free meals without requiring paper applications.

Of the 145,770 school children in Rhode Island, 62,196 (43 percent) are eligible for free or reduced-price school lunch.12 The federal government reimburses Rhode Island for each lunch served. In the 2009 federal fiscal year, Rhode Island received $23 million in National School Lunch Program reimbursements.13 Current reimbursement rates—$2.72 for free lunches; $2.32 for reduced-price lunches—will increase by 6 cents-per-meal following Congressional approval.

SUMMER MEALS

For many children from low-income families, the end of the school year means that they can no longer count on receiving nutritious breakfast and lunch meals. Summer is a time of heightened hunger for these children unless they have access to summer meal sites. In 2010, summer meals were served at 148 sites across Rhode Island, reaching 8,000 children—less than two of every ten children who depend on free or reduced-price school lunch.14

In addition to the low level of participation, the timing is off. Most summer meal sites close weeks before school begins. To fill the gap, the Rhode Island Community Food Bank created Rhode Island Meals 4 Kids, a special distribution of nutritious food packages at the end of the summer. In 2010, with funding from the 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA), Meals 4 Kids delivered food boxes to 10,000 families in need.

AFTERSCHOOL MEALS

Children in afterschool programs are active and often hungry for supper long before their parents arrive to pick them up. The Rhode Island Community Food Bank prepares and delivers nutritious dinner meals to ten afterschool programs in Providence and Newport. Known as Kids Cafe, the program feeds more than 500 children daily. The meals are reimbursed through the federal Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP).
SNAP (formerly the Food Stamp Program)

Enrollment in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, SNAP, grew by a staggering 26 percent in the past year. SNAP benefits now reach one in seven Rhode Islanders. Many have no other source of income for food.  

SNAP provides eligible households with an EBT (electronic benefits transfer) card to purchase food at supermarkets, grocery stores and farmers’ markets. Last year, Rhode Island received $226 million from the federal government in SNAP benefits representing a major boost to the local food economy.

SNAP Outreach

The SNAP Outreach Project at the University of Rhode Island identifies eligible households and helps them enroll. In cooperation with emergency food pantries and meal programs across the state, outreach workers provide eligibility information and application assistance to families experiencing hunger. Enrollment in SNAP increased among food pantry clients from 35 percent to 57 percent between 2006 and 2009 through this outreach effort. The Rhode Island Community Food Bank partners with the SNAP Outreach Project, employing two workers to assist clients at emergency food programs and community action agencies in Newport and Woonsocket.

SNAP benefits now reach one in seven Rhode Islanders. Many have no other source of income for food.

SNAP Rhode Island SNAP enrollment

(Monthly figures)

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of Enrollees</th>
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<td>2007</td>
<td>79,551</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>88,738</td>
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<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>119,439</td>
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<td>2010</td>
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MEALS ON WHEELS

The elderly poor are at high risk for hunger. Among those living alone with income below 130 percent of the federal poverty level, one out of five lacks adequate food. Meals on Wheels of Rhode Island provides home delivered meals to home-bound elderly individuals. In the past year, September 2009 through August 2010, the agency delivered 444,500 meals with 46 percent of the meals delivered to people over age 85.
Summary and Recommendations

There is widespread need in Rhode Island due to high unemployment and growing poverty. Food insecurity and hunger are at a ten-year high. People who never imagined needing food assistance are applying for government benefits or standing in lines at food pantries and soup kitchens. The recession has created more than a temporary need because thousands of families face ongoing deprivation and despair.

In Rhode Island, 55,000 people receive emergency food assistance each month. Emergency food programs provided 15 million meals in the year ending August 2010, two million more meals than the previous year. But as food donations to the Food Bank decrease, emergency food programs cannot be expected to produce more meals or serve more people. Our capacity has been reached.

Unlike emergency food programs, government sponsored nutrition programs can scale up to feed more people in a time of increased need. For example, in this recession, SNAP enrolled thousands of new families, protecting them from hunger. Action is needed at federal, state and local levels to improve and expand these programs:

- Congress and the USDA should raise SNAP benefit amounts for families in the summer months when children miss out on school meals.
- Rhode Island should make it possible for the thousands of children who participate in RIte Care, the state’s Medicaid managed care health insurance program, to qualify automatically for free school meals.
- School districts with a large percentage of low-income families should provide School Breakfast to every child who wants it, free of charge, at the beginning of the school day. This simple change would allow 15,000 more Rhode Island children to eat breakfast and begin the school day ready to learn.

Hunger is not an insurmountable problem. We don’t have to construct new buildings, pave roads or buy more equipment to reach those in need. The infrastructure exists in supermarkets, farmers’ markets, schools and afterschool programs.

200 Niantic Avenue
Providence, RI 02907
Phone: (401) 942-6325
www.rifoodbank.org

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5. Ibid.
15. Total Food Stamp Program Participation, Rhode Island Department of Human Services, 2010.
17. Actual and Projected Participant & Issuance Data, Rhode Island Department of Human Services, 2010.