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## **Food Insecurity in Rhode Island Reaches Highest Level on Record**

*Demand at emergency food programs up 58% since start of economic recession*

PROVIDENCE—Stark new statistics released by the Rhode Island Community Food Bank point to a sharp rise in food insecurity and hunger in Rhode Island since the beginning of the economic recession. **Over the last four years, the number of people served at emergency food pantries increased by 58%.** These programs currently serve 60,000 people each month.

The Food Bank's *2011 Status Report on Hunger in Rhode Island* calls attention to the significant "meal gap" in the state, which represents the difference between the total number of meals needed by low-income households, and meals they are actually able to secure through a combination of sources. **Of the 198 million meals needed, Rhode Islanders in need are missing 34 million meals over the course of a year.**

"Thousands of low-income Rhode Islanders cannot afford three healthy meals a day," says Andrew Schiff, Chief Executive Officer of the Rhode Island Community Food Bank. "Even after utilizing government nutrition programs and emergency food assistance, the meal gap remains unacceptably high."

The most recent U.S. Department of Agriculture study shows that food insecurity has risen significantly from 10.9% in 2007 to 14.7% in 2010. Someone who is "food insecure" cuts the size of meals or skips meals altogether. In the course of a year, two out of every five food-insecure households run out of food entirely and experience hunger.

**There are 181,000 Rhode Islanders living in households with incomes below 130 percent of the federal poverty level** – the level that qualifies children for free school meals. For every Rhode Islander in this population to receive three meals per day, 198 million meals are needed every year.

**Annually, low-income Rhode Islanders spend \$135 million of their own money on food**, which accounts for 24% of the meals required. **The largest portion of meals – 42% -- is covered by SNAP** (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program – formerly called Food Stamps). The Rhode Island Community Food Bank’s network of member agencies contributes 9% of the meals, while the National School Lunch and Breakfast Programs account for 6%. A small portion of residents rely on WIC (Women, Infants and Children) benefits, which helps with 2% of the meals needed. **This leaves a meal gap of 17%.**

“Rhode Island’s meal gap of 34 million meals did not happen overnight,” says Schiff. “Before the Great Recession hit the rest of the country, Rhode Island was already in a tailspin. In the long run, the best way to close the meal gap is through restored jobs and wages. Until economic recovery takes hold, however, struggling families need help – from the government and from the community.”

The *Status Report* makes several recommendations to eliminate the meal gap:

- Strengthen the nutrition safety net by increasing SNAP benefit levels in the 2012 Farm Bill.
- Reach out to all eligible Rhode Island families and encourage them to enroll in SNAP.
- Fully fund WIC to ensure that every eligible infant and child receives these critical nutrition benefits.
- Make WIC more user-friendly by replacing WIC vouchers with EBT cards, similar to those used in the SNAP program.
- Restore federal grants for emergency food programs and homeless shelters.
- Provide school breakfast to every child who wants it, free of charge, at the beginning of the school day at all schools with a majority of students from low-income families.

For more information on the food insecurity in Rhode Island and how you can help, visit [www.rifoodbank.org](http://www.rifoodbank.org).

**The Rhode Island Community Food Bank** is a non-profit organization located in Providence, RI. The Food Bank solicits, stores and distributes food products donated by supermarkets, wholesalers, food processors, local farmers and community food drives. The food is then distributed to the Food Bank’s statewide network of more than 250 member agency programs. In the past fiscal year, the Food Bank distributed 9.4 million pounds of food. For more information about the Food Bank, please visit [www.rifoodbank.org](http://www.rifoodbank.org).

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