



# Status Report on Hunger in Rhode Island 2010

**T**he 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.

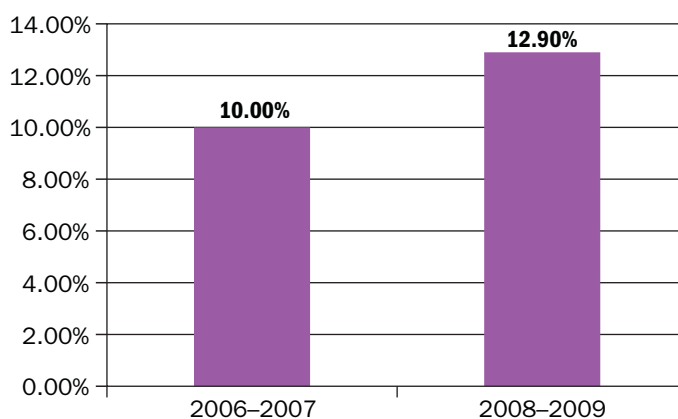
## Major Findings of the Report

- 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,

Poverty Rate in Rhode Island



**12.9 percent of the population of Rhode Island lives in poverty — 135,000 people.**

Rhode Island has had the highest unemployment rate in New England.<sup>1</sup> Approximately 66,000 people look for work, but are unable to find jobs. The numbers of jobless have more than doubled since September 2007.

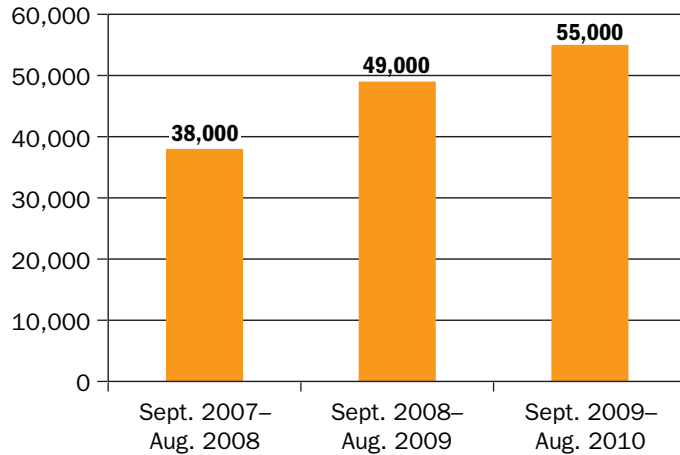
In addition to unemployed individuals, many others are either underemployed or so discouraged that they have stopped looking for work. Underemployment is particularly acute among the poor who have been more adversely affected than other income groups by the deep deterioration in the job market.<sup>2</sup>

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.<sup>3</sup>

### 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.<sup>4</sup>

**People Served at Rhode Island Food Pantries**  
(monthly average)



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

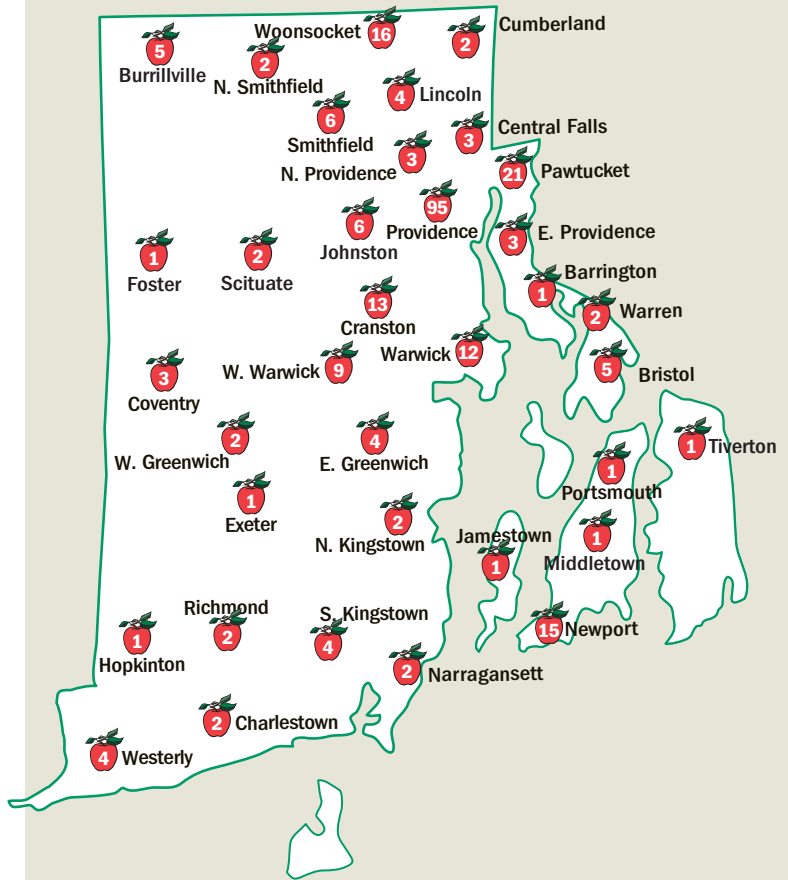
### The Food Bank Responds

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.<sup>5</sup>

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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.*

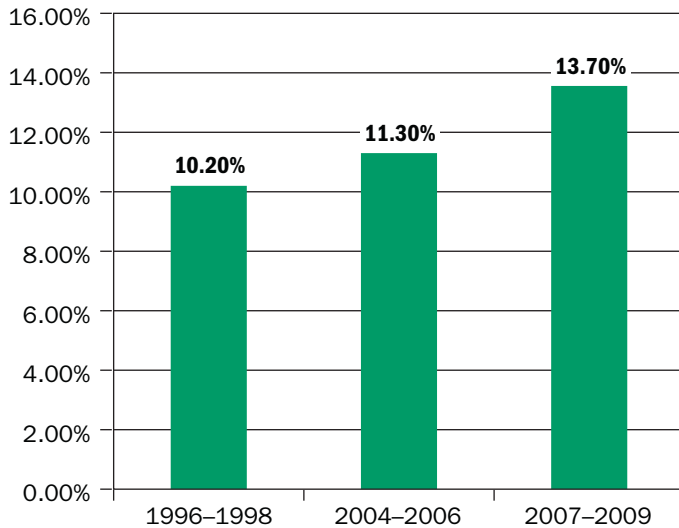


### Prevalence of Food Insecurity and Hunger

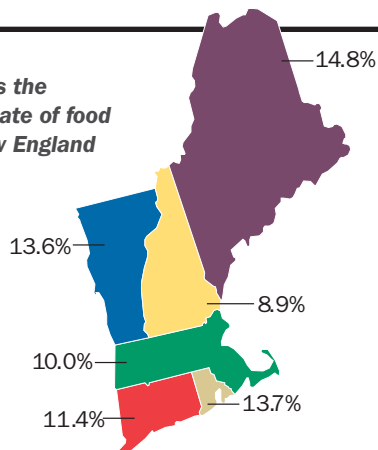
Food insecurity in a family occurs when the household lacks enough nutritious food to keep every member active and healthy. Being food insecure means family members cut the size of meals, skip meals and eventually experience hunger when the household runs out of food. According to the latest report from the USDA, 13.7 percent of households in Rhode Island were food insecure in 2009.<sup>6</sup> The prevalence of food insecurity and hunger is at the highest level in a decade.

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**Growth in Food Insecurity Among Rhode Island Households**



**Rhode Island has the second highest rate of food insecurity in New England**



### 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*.<sup>7</sup>

While approximately 51,000 Rhode Island children receive free or reduced-price school lunch, far fewer participate in the *School Breakfast Program*.<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup> 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

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*The School Breakfast Program is a solution to child hunger and a boost to learning.*

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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

School District and Schools	School Enrollment 2009–2010	Students Receiving Breakfast 2008–09	Students Receiving Breakfast 2009–2010	Change in Participation
<b>Central Falls</b>				
Ella Risk Elementary	487	177	360	183
M. I. Robertson Elementary	229	88	165	77
Veterans Memorial	470	195	385	190
<b>Newport</b>				
Dr. Michael H. Sullivan	265	133	153	20
<b>Providence</b>				
Lillian Feinstein	461	162	244	82
Flynn Elementary	499	186	250	64
Mary Fogarty	405	232	202	-30
Carl G. Lauro	768	360	399	39
Reservoir Avenue Elementary	258	90	150	60
George J. West	677	282	359	77
Windmill Elementary	360	177	202	25
<b>West Warwick</b>				
John Horgan Elementary	445	98	227	129
Maisie Quinn Elementary	342	77	178	101
<b>Woonsocket</b>				
Bernon Heights Elementary	385	119	208	89
Citizens Memorial	288	157	167	10
Kevin A. Coleman Elementary	243	73	122	49
Fifth Avenue Elementary	215	64	127	63
Harris Elementary	409	161	217	56
Aram J. Pothier Elementary	486	171	262	91
<b>TOTAL</b>	7691	3002	4377	1375

*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.*

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*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 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.*

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### **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.<sup>10</sup>

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.<sup>11</sup>

### **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.<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup> 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.<sup>14</sup>

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.<sup>15</sup> *SNAP* benefits now reach one in seven Rhode Islanders. Many have no other source of income for food.<sup>16</sup>

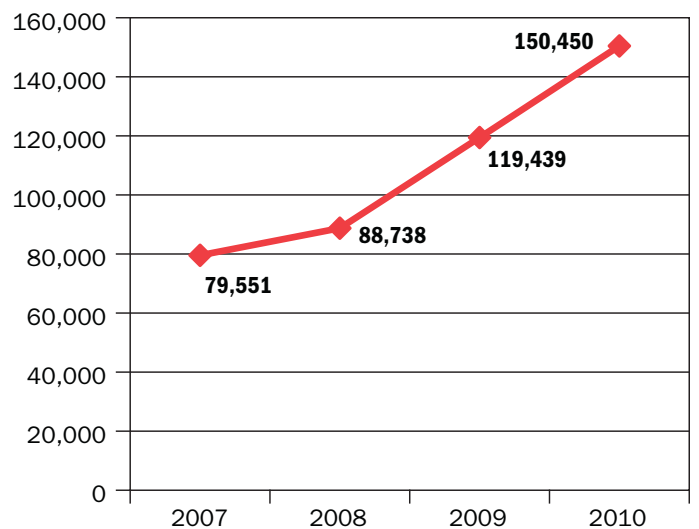
*SNAP* provides eligible households with an EBT (electronic benefits transfer) card to purchase food at supermarkets, grocery stores and farmers' markets. Last year, Rhode Island received \$226 million from the federal government in *SNAP* benefits representing a major boost to the local food economy.<sup>17</sup>

**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.<sup>18</sup> 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.

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**Rhode Island SNAP enrollment**  
(September of each year)



**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.<sup>19</sup> *Meals on Wheels of Rhode Island* provides home delivered meals to homebound 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.



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### 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. By taking full advantage of these reliable federal nutrition programs and the resilient network of the Rhode Island Community Food Bank and its Member Agencies, we can end hunger in Rhode Island.

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**200 Niantic Avenue  
Providence, RI 02907  
Phone: (401) 942-6325  
[www.rifoodbank.org](http://www.rifoodbank.org)**

