

## Legislative Wrap-Up

### 2003 SESSION OF THE RHODE ISLAND GENERAL ASSEMBLY

*Selected laws and budget appropriations affecting children in the areas of economic well-being, health, child care and early childhood education, education, and safety.*

#### ECONOMIC WELL-BEING

**Earned Income Tax Credit:** The General Assembly passed a partially refundable state Earned Income Tax Credit of up to \$50 for households with annual incomes below \$23,000. Before this passed, the state Earned Income Tax Credit was non-refundable.\*

**Neighborhood Opportunities Program:** \$5 million was invested in the Neighborhood Opportunities Program to support the development of approximately 140 new housing units.\*

**Housing:** A proposed amendment to the *Residential Landlord and Tenant Act*, which would have made it easier for landlords to evict tenants, was not enacted by the General Assembly. The law would have simplified the procedure for service of evictions.\*

**Food Stamp and Family Independence Program:** One vehicle per adult household member (maximum of 2) will be excluded from the resources of a family in determining eligibility for Family Independence Program cash assistance and for Food Stamps. This simplifies and broadens access to these programs, especially for working families.\*

#### HEALTH

**RIte Care:** There were no changes to the RIte Care program. RIte Care eligibility thresholds remained the same. Premium levels remained the same. After being increased last year, the RIte Care premium for families with an income level over 150% of the federal poverty line is 4%. Full RIte Care coverage was retained for immigrant children.\*

**Breastfeeding:** The *Nursing Working Mothers Act* was passed. It requires employers to provide a safe, private place for an employee to breastfeed her child or pump breast milk. Employers must also work with the employee to develop a mutually acceptable plan for an employee to take breaks for breastfeeding or pumping.

**Birth Defects:** A Birth Defect Surveillance and Information System was created in the Rhode Island Department of Health for the collection of information concerning birth defects of newborns and spontaneous fetal deaths.



## CHILD CARE AND EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

*Child Care:* The *Starting Right Law* requires that a market rate survey of child care be conducted every two years and that provider reimbursement rates be maintained at the 75th percentile of the market rate. The General Assembly restored the 8% rate increase that will go into effect in January 2004, pursuant to the most recent market rate survey. The legislature preserved current eligibility requirements for child care centers to offer RIte Care Health Insurance to child care staff. A new three-quarter time child care provider reimbursement rate was instituted and is scheduled to go into effect in January 2004. This new rate will be a decrease in the full-time rate that providers previously received for providing between half-time and full-time care.\*



## EDUCATION

*State Aid to Education:* \$637.6 million was allocated to school aid; this is a \$15.9 million increase from last year. Of the \$15.9 million increase, 64% was allocated to the six core cities: Central Falls, 3.6% increase; Newport, 1.8% increase; Pawtucket, 1.7% increase; Providence, 3.6% increase; West Warwick, 3.4% increase and Woonsocket, 1.7% increase. Statewide each school district received a minimum increase of 1.7%.



## SAFETY

*Abducted Children:* The General Assembly passed a law requiring the State Police to coordinate the *America's Missing: Broadcast Emergency Response Plan (AMBER Plan)*, an emergency alert plan to expedite the safe recovery of abducted children by voluntary broadcasting of emergency alerts by radio stations and broadcast media outlets.



## FISCAL YEAR 2004 BUDGET

The 2003 Rhode Island General Assembly session began with an estimated projected budget deficit of \$135 million for fiscal year 2004, according to the State Budget Office. The legislature used a one-time \$102 million federal aid grant available as part of the federal *Jobs and Growth Act of 2003*, to balance the budget for fiscal year 2004. Half of the federal aid grant to Rhode Island was provided through Medicaid. The General Assembly used the additional funds to finance Medicaid expenditures that would have otherwise been supported with state general revenue funds, thereby freeing up the state resources to balance the budget. The Governor vetoed the budget. The General Assembly overrode the Governor's veto and enacted a budget of \$5.7 billion for fiscal year 2004, representing a 6.3% increase from \$5.4 billion in fiscal year 2003. \$2.8 billion of the budget is state general revenue, \$1.8 billion is federal funds, \$144 million is restricted fees and \$1 billion is other funds. According to the State Budget Office, the estimated projected budget deficit for fiscal year 2005 is \$154.3 million.



## ONE RHODE ISLAND

"One Rhode Island" is a coalition of over 130 advocacy, religious, social service and policy organizations that promote a Platform of income and work-supports for low and moderate income Rhode Islanders. Rhode Island Kids Count participated in the 10-member steering committee, facilitated by the Poverty Institute, that developed the Platform and worked together with coalition members for its enactment. The Platform supported housing, improvements in the Family Independence Program, restoration of a cost-of-living increase for Supplemental Security Income recipients, a state refundable earned income tax credit, maintenance of RIte Care eligibility thresholds and reduction of RIte Care premiums, increased access to food stamps and maintenance of the state's commitment to subsidized child care. Several items in the One Rhode Island Platform were enacted, including: a state refundable earned income tax credit, a vehicle exclusion in the eligibility requirements for the Food Stamp program and Family Independence Program, retention of the scheduled increase in child care provider reimbursement rates, and \$5 million for affordable housing.

*\*This item was included in the One Rhode Island platform.*



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