

FOOD STAMPS: A COMPREHENSIVE FOOD ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

The federal Food Stamp Program is an entitlement program that helps low-income families and individuals with incomes below 130% of the Federal Poverty Level (\$20,917 for a household of three) to purchase and consume quality, nutritious food.^{1,2} The Food Stamp Program is the nation's and Rhode Island's largest and most comprehensive food assistance program.

Despite the Food Stamp Program's success in reducing the number of children and families experiencing severe hunger, not all eligible residents participate. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture in 2002 in Rhode Island, an estimated 57% of people eligible for food stamps were receiving the benefit, compared to 54% nationally. This means that approximately 53,000 Rhode Island residents who were eligible for food stamps did not participate.³

WHY THE FOOD STAMP PROGRAM IS IMPORTANT IN RHODE ISLAND

The Food Stamp Program serves a wide range of low-income people, including families with children, working adults, elderly people, and people with disabilities. Food stamps are targeted to those with the greatest need for help in purchasing food. Almost half of participants in Rhode Island are children.

Recent data show that more than 1 in 10 Rhode Islanders are food insecure which means they do not have consistent, dependable access to enough food for a healthy life. An estimated 4% of Rhode Islanders experience hunger, the recurrent and involuntary lack of food due to limited resources. Rhode Island had the highest percentage of food insecure households in New England.⁴

Nationally, children comprise an estimated 36% of all individuals living in food-insecure households. An estimated 46,000 children in Rhode Island lived in a household where there was a lack of money to purchase adequate and nutritious food.^{5,6} Research shows that hunger and lack of regular access to adequate food are linked to serious health, psychological, emotional and academic problems in children and can impede their healthy growth and development.⁷

FOOD STAMPS SUPPORT WORKING FAMILIES

By lessening the extent and severity of poverty, the Food Stamp Program can make a significant difference in the lives of low-income working families who encounter difficulties meeting their basic needs.

THE DIFFERENCE FOOD STAMPS MAKE FOR WORKING POOR FAMILIES (ONE PARENT WITH TWO YOUNG CHILDREN)

Income Needed to Meet Basic Expenses*: \$21,828				
INCOME WITH FOOD STAMPS	Take Home Pay from Full-Time Minimum Wage Job: \$12,732	Earned Income Tax Credit: \$4,200	Food Stamps: \$2,268	Total: \$19,560 (90%)
INCOME WITHOUT FOOD STAMPS	Take Home Pay from Full-Time Minimum Wage Job: \$12,732	Earned Income Tax Credit: \$4,200	Total: \$17,292 (79%)	
Child Care Tax Credit: \$360				

◆ According to the *2003 Rhode Island Standard of Need* (RISN), a family of three would need \$21,828 per year in order to meet their basic living expenses.*

◆ A household with one full-time, year round worker making the minimum wage of \$6.75 an hour would have a total income of \$17,292.** A working family who does not receive any food stamps would only have 79% of the income needed to meet their expenses.

◆ If the same working family of three received food stamps, their income would be 90% of that needed to meet their basic expenses. The Food Stamp Program helps to bridge the gap for many working families in Rhode Island between what they earn and what they need in order to pay for basic living expenses.

Source: Rhode Island KIDS COUNT analysis based on data from the *2003 Rhode Island Standard of Need*.

* Expenses assume the family is enrolled in the Child Care Assistance Program and RIte Care/RIte Share and is not required to pay co-payments.

** After deducting payroll and income tax and accounting for eligible tax credits.

FOOD STAMPS SUPPORT LOCAL COMMUNITIES

In addition to providing food for individuals and families, food stamps also provide a degree of protection for the local economy. Because of its automatic response to increased need, food stamps can help maintain overall demand for food during slow economic periods. As unemployment increases, people have fewer resources overall, which results in less money to be spent on food and lower quality food purchases. The Food Stamp Program can slow this negative cycle by compensating to some degree for people's loss of income.⁸

FOOD STAMP FUNDING IN RHODE ISLAND, FISCAL YEAR 2005

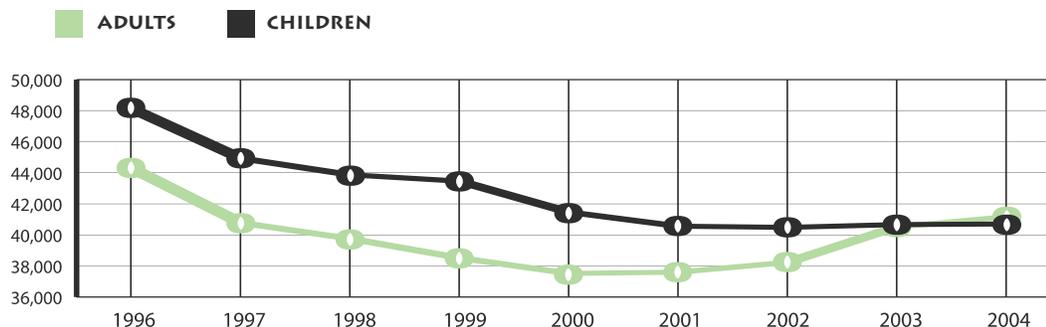
	FEDERAL FUNDS	STATE GENERAL REVENUES	TOTAL FOOD STAMP FUNDING
Food Stamp Administration	\$7,288,614	\$6,226,810	\$13,515,424
Food Stamp Employment Program	\$278,656		\$278,656
Food Stamp Access	\$400,000		\$400,000
Food Stamp Benefit	\$75,827,580		\$75,827,580
TOTAL	\$83,794,850	\$6,226,810*	\$90,021,660

(Source: House Fiscal Advisory Staff Budget as Enacted, FY 2006.)

* In state Fiscal Year '06, Rhode Island appropriated \$100,000 to the Food Stamp Outreach Plan. This money will be matched 100% by federal dollars.

◆ The federal government pays the full cost of an individual's food stamp benefits and approximately half of the state's cost to administer the program. In state Fiscal Year '05, nearly \$84 million dollars of federal funding for the Food Stamp Program flowed into Rhode Island.⁹ A study by the USDA shows that every \$5 of food stamps generates almost \$10 in total economic activity.¹⁰

CHILDREN UNDER AGE 18 AND ADULTS PARTICIPATING IN THE FOOD STAMP PROGRAM, RHODE ISLAND, OCTOBER 1996-2004



Source: Rhode Island Department of Human Services, InRhodes Database, October 1996 – 2004.

◆ The number of children participating in the Food Stamp Program decreased from 48,144 in 1996 to 40,704 in 2004, a 15% decrease. During the same time period, the number of adults on the Food Stamp program decreased from 44,309 to 41,162, a 7% decrease.¹¹

◆ Most non-participation in the Food Stamp Program does not result from a lack of awareness about the program, but rather is a result of individuals or families being unaware of their eligibility. A recent national study on eligible non-participants in the Food Stamp Program found that more than 57% of people surveyed did not believe they were eligible.¹²

◆ In a recent Rhode Island study, 21% of survey respondents stated that stigma was a reason they chose not to apply to the Food Stamp Program.¹³ Efforts have been made by the Food Stamp Program to reduce stigma and encourage more eligible individuals to apply for assistance by eliminating the use of “stamp booklets” and implementing an Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) card. The EBT card functions similar to debit and credit cards and can be used in conjunction with coupons and sale items at the register. Each month the household's food stamp benefit is direct deposited into the EBT account.



**CHILDREN UNDER
AGE 18 RECEIVING
FOOD STAMPS,
RHODE ISLAND,
OCTOBER 2004**

CITY/TOWN	% OF INCOME-ELIGIBLE CHILDREN PARTICIPATING
Barrington	18%
Bristol	29%
Burrillville	67%
Central Falls	79%
Charlestown	44%
Coventry	70%
Cranston	79%
Cumberland	67%
East Greenwich	40%
East Providence	66%
Exeter	46%
Foster	32%
Glocester	29%
Hopkinton	43%
Jamestown	36%
Johnston	66%
Lincoln	51%
Little Compton	48%
Middletown	25%
Narragansett	37%
New Shoreham	5%
Newport	47%
North Kingstown	47%
North Providence	57%
North Smithfield	59%
Pawtucket	75%
Portsmouth	22%
Providence	80%
Richmond	63%
Scituate	39%
Smithfield	35%
South Kingstown	59%
Tiverton	68%
Warren	61%
Warwick	81%
West Greenwich	44%
West Warwick	57%
Westerly	52%
Woonsocket	70%
Core Cities	76%
Remainder of State	59%
Rhode Island	71%

Source: Calculations by Rhode Island KIDS COUNT based on data from the Rhode Island Department of Human Services, INRHODES, October 2004.

THE RHODE ISLAND FOOD STAMP OUTREACH PLAN

The Food Stamp Outreach Plan in Rhode Island aims to improve access to and increase participation in the Food Stamp Program, with an emphasis on increasing awareness of eligibility among underserved populations, such as working families, the elderly and immigrant populations. To meet the Outreach Project's goal, the Feinstein Center for a Hunger Free America at the University of Rhode Island, in partnership with DHS and the USDA, utilizes four strategies:

- ◆ A broad based media campaign to raise awareness and decrease stigma associated with the program, by using radio, billboards, bus shelters, and busses.
- ◆ Trainings on the Food Stamp Program to agencies who work directly with potentially eligible clientele using a prescreening tool.
- ◆ Directed mailings, done in partnership with state agencies, to targeted groups of low-income populations.
- ◆ Direct outreach to potentially eligible individuals utilizing trained workers and volunteers in local community sites to assist in answering questions, prescreening, and providing direct application assistance.

In 2005, Rhode Island dedicated \$100,000 from the state budget to help improve access and enrollment of eligible families and individuals in the Food Stamp Program. This appropriation will be matched with an additional \$100,000 of federal funds.

Source: Feinstein Center for a Hunger Free America at the University of Rhode Island.

- ◆ In Rhode Island in 2004, 71% of the estimated income-eligible children (ages birth to 18 living in families with incomes below 130% of poverty) were participating in the Food Stamp Program.
- ◆ Rhode Island's six core cities, those cities with 15% or more of child poverty, had a higher percentage of income-eligible children participating in the Food Stamp Program than the suburban communities and the state as a whole.¹⁴
- ◆ Outreach and education, in conjunction with increased access to the Food Stamp Program in these suburban communities, are critical to ensuring that all eligible children and families receive the support they need to purchase healthy and nutritious foods.¹⁵



RECENT CHANGES TO THE FOOD STAMP PROGRAM

VEHICLES

◆ In October 2003, Rhode Island implemented an Automobile Exclusion Policy. The new policy allows for one automobile per adult (for up to two adults per household) to be excluded from resource consideration for food stamp and cash assistance eligibility, regardless of the value of the vehicle. All other vehicles are subject to the federal food stamp rules, unless the automobile is used for purposes of work.

FELONY CONVICTIONS

◆ In August 2004, Rhode Island repealed the ban of Food Stamp and Family Independence Program (FIP) participation for persons with drug-related felony convictions. Prior to this change those that had been convicted of the sale or distribution of drugs were not eligible for food stamps or FIP assistance.

SIMPLIFIED REPORTING REQUIREMENTS

◆ In December 2004, Rhode Island implemented a simplified reporting policy for most food stamp households. Households in this category receive a constant amount of food stamps for a six month period and are only required to report to the Department of Human Services if income exceeds the gross income limit. Previously, food stamp households needed to report changes in monthly unearned income of \$50 or more, changes in monthly earned income of \$100 or more, changes in household size, shelter costs and resources.

THE STANDARD UTILITY ALLOWANCES

◆ As of April 2005, the Standard Utility Allowance (SUA) was made mandatory in eligibility calculations. SUAs are based on an annualized average of utility costs in the state. SUAs include the cost of heating, cooking fuel, electricity, or gas not used to heat or cool the residence, the basic service fee for one telephone, water, sewage and garbage and trash collection. Previously, actual utility costs for some households were used to calculate a household's total shelter costs. Use of the SUA benefits those living in public housing and those with shared living arrangements.

ABLE-BODIED ADULTS WITHOUT DEPENDENTS (ABAWD)

◆ The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, established that able-bodied adults without dependents (ABAWDs) who were not working, participating in, or complying with the requirements of a work program for 20 hours or more each week would be limited to three months of food stamps in a three year period.

◆ Waivers are granted to cities and towns based on unemployment and labor force statistics. As of April 2005, several key Rhode Island cities lost their ABAWD waivers extending food stamp benefits beyond the three month restriction. To assist those individuals no longer exempt from the ABAWD regulations, the Rhode Island Department of Human Services began dedicating Food Stamp Education and Training dollars to assisting the ABAWD population in obtaining employment.



RECENT CHANGES TO THE FOOD STAMP PROGRAM

CHILD SUPPORT INCOME EXCLUSION

◆ Effective May 2005, child support payments became an income exclusion in calculating household eligibility, as long as the household member had a legal obligation to pay child support and the actual child support payments were verified.

DENIAL OF APPLICATIONS

- ◆ Prior to October 2005, food stamp applications could be denied prior to 30 days only if:
 - ◆ The applicant provided all necessary information and an eligibility determination was made.
 - ◆ The applicant failed to comply with a request to supply missing documentation.
 - ◆ The household requested in writing that their application be withdrawn.
- ◆ As of October 2005, Rhode Island received a waiver allowing the denial of cases before the thirty day period. The new rule gives applicants ten days from the date of application to provide all necessary documentation. The Department of Human Services must provide in writing what documentation is required and must offer help in obtaining the missing documentation. Failure to comply in 10 days will result in a denial of the application.
- ◆ If the case is denied before thirty days from the date of application and the missing documentation is supplied within the thirty day window, the case can be reactivated for consideration. If the applicant supplies the information before the next 30 days (for a total of 60 after the application) the closed application can be reopened and benefits will be assigned according to the reopen date.

Source: Rhode Island Department of Human Services Rules and Regulations as of November 2005, at www.dhs.ri.gov.

IMMIGRANTS AND THE FOOD STAMP PROGRAM

Under the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Reconciliation Act, most legal immigrants were denied the right to receive food stamps. In 2002 the Farm Bill restored food stamp eligibility to three groups of legal immigrants: the disabled, children under the age of 18 and non-citizens with 5 years of legal U.S. residency. Adults do not have to provide documents about themselves when they apply only for the children or other eligible persons in the household. However, applicants will still have to show proof of income and resources in order to determine the amount of the food stamp benefit.

Federal law requires states to provide access to materials in languages spoken by their constituents. Currently Rhode Island's application is only available in English. The Department of Human Services is in the process of translating all necessary Food Stamp documents.

Source: Food Stamp Policy on Immigrants, USDA, Food and Nutrition Service, at www.usda.gov.



APPLYING FOR THE FOOD STAMP PROGRAM

To apply for the Food Stamp Program, households must complete an application with DHS. Applications can be obtained online at www.ridhseligscreening.org, by calling 401-462-5300 to request an application by mail, or by visiting a local DHS office.

An interview is required to complete the application process. If the applicant is unable to attend an interview due to transportation, health, child care, time constraints, or work obligations, a telephone interview can be requested.

Food Stamp Offices are open from 8:30-4:00, Monday – Friday.
To find your local office:

- ◆ Visit <http://www.dhs.ri.gov/dhs/doffices.htm> or
- ◆ Call the DHS Food Stamp Program:
Providence area residents: 401-222-7276
Northern RI area residents: 401-235-6300
Warwick area residents: 1-800-282-7021
South County area residents: 1-800-282-7021
East Bay area residents: 401-222-7276



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