

R.I. food stamp use ranks near bottom

But most of state's neediest children get health insurance

By Ted Nesi
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PROVIDENCE – Rhode Island ranked fifth from the bottom out of all 50 states when it came to the percentage of eligible residents who signed up for food stamps in 2006, with just 55 percent of those eligible enrolled in the federally-funded program, according to a report published over the weekend.

But the report found Rhode Island was among the top 10 states in recent years when it came to the number of residents who signed up for four of six other safety net programs: cash welfare, housing assistance, health insurance for poor adults, and health insurance for poor children.

The figures were contained in a study of regional variations in government assistance published on Sunday by [The New York Times](#). The report relied on data for 2006 through 2008, depending on the program.

"As millions of people seek government aid, many for the first time, they are finding it dispensed American style: through a jumble of disconnected programs that reach some and reject others, often for reasons of geography or chance rather than differences in need," the paper reported.

Although some of the numbers used by The Times are out of date, they do help to illustrate the areas in which Rhode Island's social safety net is strongest and where it is frayed, according to Linda Katz, policy director of The Poverty Institute at Rhode Island College, which studies and advocates for Rhode Island's low-income population.

In 2006, just 55 percent of Rhode Islanders who were eligible signed up for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or food stamps – which is administrated by the state but paid for by the federal government – according to The Times. The national average was 67 percent, and the average in the other five New England states was 74 percent.

Rhode Island was the only state east of the Great Plains that ranked in the bottom 10 for food stamp usage by eligible residents, the report said.

But Katz said changes the state has made in recent months should significantly increase the number of eligible state residents who get food stamps. In March, 94,600 Rhode Island residents were receiving food stamps, according to The Poverty Institute.

"For the food stamps it's been a complicated process [to sign up], but Rhode Island has been making strides in terms of streamlining access to the program, improving outreach and making some administrative changes that simplify the process for people to come onto

the program," she said. "It's helping to open the doors to the benefits to which people are entitled."

The program that has the highest uptake by far is RItte Care, the state's health insurance program for poor children. Between 2006 and 2008, the study said 85 percent of low-income Rhode Island children had health insurance, one of the highest percentages in the country.

"Rhode Island has been a leader in extending health insurance coverage to children in low- and middle-income families," Katz said, although she said there has been "some slippage in recent years with the increase in premiums for families."

The share of low-income adults who were covered by government programs was 57 percent, according to the study. Katz said that figure would include poor elderly and disabled residents, as well as parents of poor children; there is no health insurance program for poor adults who are not either elderly, disabled, or parents.

The study said the share of eligible Rhode Island households that received housing benefits, such as subsidized or public housing, was 39 percent from 2006 to 2008, which Katz said was "not surprising." But she added that a key state housing assistance initiative in recent years, the Neighborhood Opportunities Program, would be eliminated under the 2009-10 budget proposed by Gov. Donald L. Carcieri.

The study also looked at cash welfare, the once-controversial program that was overhauled in a landmark 1996 federal law. As of last fall, 40 percent of those Rhode Island children and parents whose annual income was below the federal poverty line were receiving cash assistance, the report said.

Katz said the state's welfare program – which used to be called the Family Independence Program but was renamed the Rhode Island Works program last year – provides \$554 a month to a family of three. "As small as that is, that may be the slender thread that's helping a family stay in their home," she said.

Katz said she is concerned because the state is planning to tighten eligibility requirements for Rhode Island Works on July 1, reducing to about 9,000, from 14,000, the number of poor children whose families receive the payments.

"It's supposed to provide a safety net to help a child stay at home with their parents through cash support when parents are unable to support them, either because of a disability or temporary unemployment," she said, adding that the program "is already shredded, and it's about to disappear" for about 5,000 poor families.

The study also found that 43 percent of unemployed Rhode Islanders received jobless benefits in 2008.