

## State can't be complacent on poverty

The Newport Daily News  
4.9.08

For the first time in several years, the percentage of children living in poverty in Rhode Island has decreased.

But given the shaky economic climate and dire budgetary straits Rhode Island faces, it's doubtful that trend, as reported in the 2008 Rhode Island Kids Count Factbook released this week, will continue.

Meanwhile, a report to be released today shows that the gap between the richest and poorest residents in Rhode Island has grown significantly over the past two decades.

In fact, Rhode Island has the 12th-highest disparity in the nation, according to a state-by-state analysis by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities and the Economic Policy Institute.

While the average income of the poorest fifth of families in the state has not changed significantly since the mid-1980s, the average after-tax income of the richest fifth of families increased by 43.5 percent from \$99,773 to \$143,211, a rise of \$43,438. The average income of middle earners increased \$6,744 in that time to \$56,457.

"As policymakers deal with the budget crisis, they must keep this study in mind and make choices that close this widening gap between the top and the bottom," said Ellen Frank, economist at The Poverty Institute, which announced the release of the report, called "Pulling Apart."

"Cutting income-support programs like RIte Care and cash assistance for low-income families will only further exacerbate growing inequality in the Ocean State," Frank said.

Indeed, such cuts could push more children back into poverty, Rhode Island Kids Count Executive Director Elizabeth Burke Bryant said.

According to the latest report, 15 percent of Rhode Island's children — or a total of 35,456 — were living in poverty in 2006, compared to 21 percent in 2004, a decrease of about 15,000 children.

"Child poverty decreased in our state between 2004 and 2006, during a time when the state was making critical investments in child care, health care and adult education," Burke Bryant said. "It is imperative that we maintain and restore our critical investments in working families."

As the state wades through a gloomy economic picture — including job loss — continuing education, work-force training (and retraining) and family support programs will become even more important.

Yet in an effort to bridge a \$450 million budget deficit, Gov. Donald L. Carcieri has proposed cutting welfare benefits to children, tightening eligibility for state-subsidized health care and cutting spending on preschool programs.

Carcieri expects nonprofit organizations to pick up the slack, but they are being hit doubly hard by reduced government support and decreased donations from individuals

who, facing increased costs in just about every part of their budgets, are watching every penny.

While Carcieri has promised not to raise taxes — and, in fact, has reduced taxes for some of the wealthiest Rhode Island residents — it does not make sense to punish those least able to fend for themselves, and that certainly includes poor children.

It has become popular to say that government should run more like a business to save money, but this is one way in which it simply can't: Government cannot — and must not — leave behind the most vulnerable of its citizens, especially its children.

Moreover, while cutting such programs may save money in the short term, as Senate Majority Leader Teresa Paiva Weed, D-Newport, pointed out during a rally in support of Rite Care last week in Newport, “Such cuts cost us more in the long run, both financially and as a society.”

We hope these two reports will help frame the state's discussions about social-service spending, so the programs that are working — and can show it — are able to continue in their important role, bridging poverty and opportunity.

© Copyright 2001 - 2008. The Newport Daily News. All Rights Reserved.