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Powerful new report points to need for renewed commitment to programs that help low- and modest-income women and their families

State investments in women's economic self-sufficiency misaligned with the needs of the modern family

PROVIDENCE, RI (April 6, 2010) – Calling the state budget Rhode Island's most important public policy document, the new report released today by The Poverty Institute and The Women's Fund of Rhode Island, "*An Uneven Path: State Investments in Women's Economic Self-Sufficiency*" demonstrates the impact that state budget cuts have had on four key programs that help families make ends meet. According to the report, the state's child care assistance, health care, child support, and cash assistance programs help women, particularly low-income working mothers, overcome some of the economic hardships they face.

"On average women earn 74 cents for every dollar earned by men; are almost twice as likely to work part-time as their male counterparts; and are over-represented in poorly paid administrative and service occupations," said Marcia Coné, Executive Director of the Women's Fund of Rhode Island in her introduction of the report's results, "The *Uneven Path* demonstrates that in many ways programs intended to move women to economic self-sufficiency have not been a funding priority. The erosion of these programs has exacerbated the difficult financial condition many Rhode Island women find themselves in."

Key findings include:

- **Child Care:** State investments in the Starting Right Child Care Assistance program fell by almost 90% since 2005. Program restrictions have resulted in fewer children being enrolled in 2010 (6,810) than when the program began in 1997 (7,159).
- **Cash Assistance:** State investments in the cash assistance program have been cut so dramatically that today, no state funds are being spent on benefits. A 2008 overhaul of the program that included new strict time limits has caused close to one-third of enrolled families (3,000) to lose their benefits during the economic downturn and removed access to education and training which limits opportunities to obtain jobs that pay family-sustaining wages.
- **Health Care:** RIte Care/RIte Share health insurance enrollment dropped by 8,000 people between 2005 and 2009 as a result of spending cuts and programmatic changes.
- **Child Support:** The Child Support Enforcement Office lost close to one-third of its staff between 2006 and 2008, resulting in very high caseloads per worker; the state lags considerably behind all other New England states and the nation when it comes to establishing child support orders.

"These programs are vital to a woman's ability to seek and sustain employment while caring for her family – an even more difficult task during harsh economic times. Child care, health care, and child support can help close the gap between earnings and the cost of raising a family. The cash assistance program can be a lifeline for low-skilled working mothers who lose their jobs and may not qualify for unemployment benefits. The cruel irony is that as today's stagnant wages and record high unemployment levels have left more women and families in need of help, less government assistance is available," said Kate Brewster, Executive Director of The Poverty Institute.

Members of the business community expressed concerns about the findings at a press conference announcing the release of the report. Liana Cassar, an entrepreneur and owner of Rooted Radiance, stated, “As a businessperson, I am concerned that we have lost sight of the fact that a woman’s economic well-being is essential to her family, our community, and the local economy. Our policy decisions should reflect the economic realities of families and align public policy and state spending with the needs of the modern family. Supporting families at the lower end of the economic spectrum must be part of our state’s economic development strategy.”

According to the report, close to seventy percent of children under the age of six have both parents in the workforce, and the average cost of care for an infant or toddler in a child care center (\$13,078/year) is almost double the cost of tuition at a public college (\$7,120/year).

“Spending cuts to child care assistance have hurt all working families in Rhode Island. Not only have thousands of children from low-income families lost access to affordable, early educational opportunities, but all working families have fewer options for care because the industry as a whole has been negatively impacted. As a result of the cuts to the child care assistance program, family child care providers in the state have been forced to close their doors,” said Sharon Moylan, Executive Director of Options for Working Families.

Recently at discussion forums around the state, the Women’s Fund of Rhode Island and The Poverty Institute shared the *Uneven Path* with women who are deeply concerned about the current situation and are looking forward to the opportunity to encourage policy makers to commit to reinvesting in Rhode Island women and families. In addition, the two organizations will host a gubernatorial candidate’s forum on women’s policy issues on May 4, 2010 at the Lincoln School. Moderate party candidate Ken Block, Treasurer Frank Caprio, Former Senator Lincoln Chafee, Attorney General Patrick Lynch, and Republican candidate John Robitaille have all committed to taking part in the forum.

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About The Poverty Institute

The Poverty Institute is a non-partisan organization that develops and promotes policies to improve the economic security of low- and modest-income Rhode Islanders and to ensure that tax and budget policies are equitable and adequate to fund vital public services. Financial support comes from foundations, corporations, and individuals who care about social change and economic justice. For more information visit www.povertyinstitute.org.

About The Women’s Fund

The mission of the Women’s Fund of Rhode Island is to advance equity and social justice for women and girls. The Fund champions fairness, impartiality, opportunity, shared power and responsibility in all spheres of personal and community life including economic, cultural, educational, social and political. For more information visit www.wfri.org.