

POVERTY INSTITUTE TRAINS HUNDREDS OF SOCIAL SERVICE PROVIDERS ON CHANGES TO PUBLIC BENEFIT PROGRAMS

By: **The Providence American**

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The Poverty Institute is criss-crossing the state in an attempt to educate social service providers about the changes made during the last legislative session to Rhode Island's RIte Care, Child Care Assistance, and Family Independence Programs. These changes were enacted as a result of last year's budget negotiations.



The newly enacted program rules are likely to cause administrative barriers that will reduce access to these income support programs for low-wage workers" said Kate Brewster, Executive Director of the Poverty Institute. The changes include closing RIte Care enrollment after December 31, 2006 to children who are Legal Permanent Residents and have been in the US less than five years, have Temporary Protected Status (which is the status of many Liberian families in RI) or are undocumented. Children with these immigration statuses already enrolled in RIte Care before the end of the year will be "grandfathered" in and remain eligible until they are 18.

The Family Independence Program was also changed last year in a number of ways. The state will now count welfare benefits received in other states toward the parent's 60 month time limit that she/he can receive cash assistance. Families who fail to comply with employment plan activities will now receive a "full family sanction" after 6 months as opposed to 18 months. According to the Poverty Institute, "This undermines the intent of the Family Independence Program which was to protect children in families that may have significant barriers to work. The full family sanction leaves families, who may well be trying to comply with the rules, with no cash assistance to pay rent, utilities and other basic necessities."

In addition to changes made at the state level, the federal government changed the Medicaid rules last year so that all U.S. Citizens who are applying for the RIte Care health insurance program will be required to prove they are a citizen and prove their identity. This will impact the majority of future and current RIte Care recipients. Those applicants or enrollees who do not have the proper documentation will likely have to pay to obtain birth certificates and state ID cards for themselves and their children. In Providence one in four children received benefits through the Family Independence program and there are 17,594 children enrolled in RIte Care.