

# Rhode Island Public Health Brief Hunger Relief Programs



Rhode Island  
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ASSOCIATION

Food Insecurity, a household-level economic and social condition of limited access to food, is a serious threat that millions of Americans face every year.<sup>i</sup> Vulnerable citizens have historically struggled with hunger. As many as 14.5 million children under age 18 and 10.2 million seniors experienced serious food insecurity in 2015.<sup>ii</sup> In an effort to combat food insecurity and hunger, nutrition programs such as Meals on Wheels and the National Lunch and Breakfast Programs were established to help seniors and children access nutritious foods.

**Meals on Wheels:** Meals on Wheels operates in virtually every community in America through a network of more than 5,000 independently-run local programs<sup>iii</sup>. The major goal of Meals on Wheels is to address food insecurity, encourage socialization, and promote health and well-being by offering free or low-cost meals to seniors<sup>iv</sup>. Meals on Wheels of Rhode Island provides daily meals to those who would otherwise lack the nutrition they need to maintain their health and independence. Presently, Rhode Island ranks 19<sup>th</sup> nationally for highest risk of food insecurity among seniors,<sup>iii</sup> making the Meals on Wheels program an important source of nutrition for this vulnerable population. In 2016, Meals on Wheels of Rhode Island provided daily meals to 2,500<sup>iii</sup> clients each day through the congregate dining program, a dine-out restaurant program, and the home-delivery program. In Rhode Island, Meals on Wheels provides the only non-profit home-delivered meal program in the state, accounting for 1,500<sup>v</sup> of the 2,500 clients served daily. Each day around noon, hundreds of volunteers bring warm and nutritious meals to seniors providing both a meal and social contact.

## Meals on Wheels Eligibility and Cost:

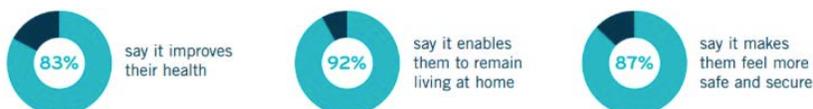
For Rhode Island residents to be eligible to receive Meals on Wheels, they must be 60 years of age or

older, unable to prepare meals due to physical limitations, and be unable to leave their home independently. The Meals on Wheels program of Rhode Island does not require that clients pay for their meals, but rather, encourage them to make a donation.<sup>iii</sup> However, regardless of donation, seniors will continue to receive meals daily.

**Meals on Wheels Funding and Importance:** The Older Americans Act (OAA) has been the primary federal legislation supporting social and nutrition services to Americans age 60 and older.<sup>iv</sup> Nationally, the OAA covers 35% of the total cost to provide nutritious meals and friendly visits to more than 2.4 million seniors through Meals on Wheels.<sup>iv</sup> Individual programs rely heavily on private contributions from state, local, or private donations to cover the remainder.<sup>iii</sup> In 2014, the OAA accounted for 138 million home-delivered meals<sup>iv</sup> across the country. With over 12,000 individuals turning 60 each day and the senior population increasingly threatened by hunger, the gap between those in need and those served through the OAA continues to widen.<sup>v</sup> OAA Nutrition programs are serving 23 million fewer meals to clients than in 2005<sup>Error! Bookmark not defined.i</sup> while waiting lists in each state steadily increase, a result of federal funding not keeping pace with growing trends.

**Benefits:** Researchers at Brown University determined that those receiving and/or requesting meals are significantly more vulnerable compared to other elderly Americans.<sup>vi</sup> Additionally, it was determined that respondents receiving daily delivered meals experienced greatest improvements in mental health, self-reported health, reduction in the rate of falls, and improvement in feelings of isolation and loneliness

Figure 1: Self-reported data from Meals on Wheels Recipients



Source "Meals on Wheels Report Rhode Island." *Meals on Wheels of Rhode Island*. 2016.

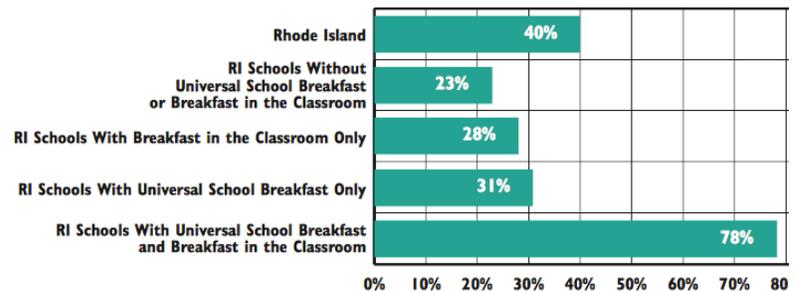
compared to those who received a few frozen meals per week (Figure 1). Overall, Meals on Wheels service delivery model has the greatest potential to decrease healthcare costs.

**National School Lunch Program:** Both the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program provide nutritionally balanced low-cost or free meals to low-income children.<sup>vii</sup> School districts that choose to participate receive cash subsidies from the United States Department of Agriculture for each meal they serve.<sup>vi</sup> In return, schools must serve foods that meet federal requirements and offer discounted meals to eligible children. Children from families with income up to 130% of the federal poverty are eligible for free lunches, and those between 130 to 185% are eligible for reduced-priced meals (\$0.45 or less).<sup>vi</sup> Currently, the School Lunch Program in Rhode Island provides low-cost or free lunches to over 77,000 children daily<sup>viii</sup> and the School Breakfast Program in Rhode Island served 30,000 children per day in 2016.<sup>ix</sup> Additionally, 69% of the 2016 lunches served in Rhode Island were free or for a reduced price.<sup>x</sup>

**Universal School Breakfast Program (USBP):** In Rhode Island, roughly half of low-income students who participate in the School Lunch Program also participated in the School Breakfast Program.<sup>ix</sup> To increase participation, all schools in Central Falls, Cranston, Pawtucket, Providence, and Woonsocket offered universal school breakfast during the 2015-2016 school year.<sup>ix</sup> (Figure 2) USBP provide free breakfasts to all children regardless of income removing the stigma associated with needs testing. Additionally, USBP saves money by eliminating administrative costs associated with verifying eligibility or need, and collecting and processing fees<sup>xi</sup>

**Benefits:** The benefits of these programs are well demonstrated. The National Lunch Program is the second largest food and nutrition assistance program behind SNAP, serving over 31 million children annually.<sup>xiii</sup> In Rhode Island, free school lunches and breakfasts account for 9% (19 million) of the total meals served to the overall population annually<sup>xii</sup>. This is the same amount contributed by the Rhode Island Food Bank and triple that of WIC. In addition to being a source of meals for low-income children, the meals provided by these programs are critical to student health and well-being. It is estimated nationally that receiving free or reduced priced meals reduces food insecurity by at least 4% in children and reduces obesity rates by at least 17%.<sup>xiii</sup>

Figure 2: Low-Income Children Participating in School Breakfast Program in RI 2016



Source: 2016 Rhode Island Kids Count Factbook. Rep. Providence: RI Kids Count,

<sup>i</sup> Alisha Coleman-Jensen, Matthew P. Rabbitt, Christian A. Gregory, and Anita Singh. Household Food Security in the United States in 2015, ERR-215, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, September 2016.

<sup>ii</sup> "Poverty and Hunger in America." *Feeding America*. Web. 04 Apr. 2017.

<sup>iii</sup> "The Problem & Our Solution." *Meals on Wheels America*. 2016. Web. 02 Apr. 2017.

<sup>iv</sup> "Meals on Wheels of Rhode Island: Giving." *Meals on Wheels of Rhode Island*. 2016. Web. 02 Apr. 2017.

<sup>v</sup> "About Meals on Wheels America." *Meals on Wheels United States Factsheet*. Web. 03 Apr. 2017.

<sup>vi</sup> Thomas, Kalli. *More Than Just a Meal: Results from a Pilot Randomized Control Trial of Home Delivered Meal Programs*. Rep. Meals on Wheels America, 2017. Print.

<sup>vii</sup> "National School Lunch Program." *Nutrition Programs - RIDE Child Nutrition Programs*. 2017. Web. 02 Apr. 2017.

<sup>viii</sup> "USDA National School Lunch Program: Total Participation." *USDA ERS - Key Statistics & Graphics*. 10 Mar. 2017. Web.

<sup>ix</sup> "School Breakfast Program." *RIDE Child Nutrition Programs*. 2017. Web. 02 Apr. 2017.

<sup>x</sup> 2016 Rhode Island Kids Count Factbook. Providence: RI "Poverty and Hunger in America." *Feeding America*. Web. 04 Apr. 2017.

<sup>xi</sup> Leos-Urbel, Jacob, Amy Ellen Schwartz, Meryle Weinstein, and Sean Corcoran. "Not just for poor kids: The impact of universal free school breakfast on meal participation and student outcomes." *Economics of Education Review* 36 (2013): 88-107.

<sup>xii</sup> 2015 Status Report on Hunger. Rep.: Rhode Island Community Food Bank, Print.

<sup>xiii</sup> "Benefits of School Lunch." *Food Research & Action Center*. Web. 02 May 2017.