



RHODE ISLAND KIDS COUNT

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For Immediate Release

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Rhode Island KIDS COUNT Presents:
Central Falls Data in Your Backyard

Presentation calls attention to the need for evidence-based programs to provide support to first-time parents and provide early learning opportunities for children.

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**Central Falls, RI, December 7, 2010** - Rhode Island KIDS COUNT Policy Analyst, Stephanie Geller, presented data from the *2010 Rhode Island Kids Count Factbook* to an audience of community leaders, parents and policy makers. The presentation included highlights of improvements and declines in the well-being of children and youth in Central Falls. After the presentation, community members discussed opportunities to improve outcomes for children in Central Falls. The presentation was hosted by the Central Falls School Department and was held on **Tuesday, December 7, 2010 from 3:00 p.m. to 4:30 p.m. at the Central Falls High School (Library)**, 24 Summer Street, Central Falls, RI.

**Education**

High-quality early learning opportunities lay the foundation for success in school and for economic success as adults. Research shows that infants, toddlers and young children who have language-rich, nurturing environments at home, at child care and/or in preschool are more likely to develop the social-emotional and cognitive skills that are the foundation for school success. In Central Falls, one in ten children in families that were income-eligible for Early Head Start was enrolled in the program. "While this is twice the state rate of 4%, more resources are needed to ensure that infants and toddlers are starting out in life with the early learning opportunities they need to thrive," stated Elizabeth Burke Bryant, Executive Director of Rhode Island KIDS COUNT. In 2009, only 29% of children eligible for Head Start in Central Falls were enrolled in the program, lower than the state rate of 40%.

One of the seven classrooms selected statewide to be part of the Rhode Island Pre-K Demonstration Program is located in Central Falls. The Pre-K Demonstration Program provides free, high-quality Pre-Kindergarten programs to participating four-year-olds. In the 2009-2010 school year, 99% of Central Falls children were enrolled in a full-day kindergarten program, compared with 60% of kindergarten children statewide. "Full-day kindergarten programs can be especially beneficial to poor and minority children and can contribute significantly to closing academic achievement gaps," stated Stephanie Geller, Policy Analyst at Rhode Island KIDS COUNT.

"There is a critical need for increased access to high-quality early learning programs in Rhode Island, particularly in communities where many children live in poverty," stated Bryant. "Science shows us that children's brains are constructed through an ongoing process that begins at birth and continues into adulthood. Early experiences actually shape the basic architecture of the brain – creating the foundation for the development of language, cognition, behavior and social-emotional skills that are essential to success in school and in life. A strong foundation leads children to thrive; a weak foundation increases the odds of future difficulties."

In addition to high rates of child poverty, Central Falls is also faced with the demands of providing a high quality education to many children who are English Language Learners. There were 642 English Language Learner students in Central Falls in 2008-2009, making up 21% of the district's students. Central Falls is making progress in improving academic achievement. "While the education trends in Central Falls are going in the right direction, Central Falls continues to fall well behind the state as a whole," stated Geller. Highlights during the 2009-2010 school year in Central Falls include:

- The rate of fourth graders reading at or above proficiency level increased from 40% in 2005 to 52% in 2009, but continued to be lower than the rate for the state as a whole (67%). Despite these significant improvements, Central Falls has the second lowest fourth grade reading proficiency level in the state.
- The rate of eighth graders reading at or above proficiency level increased from 27% in 2005 to 43% in 2009, but continued to be lower than the rate for the state as a whole (70%). Despite these significant improvements, Central Falls continued to have the lowest eighth grade reading proficiency level in the state.
- The rate of fourth graders scoring at or above proficiency in math increased from 28% in 2005 to 41% in 2009, compared to the state rate of 62%.

- The rate of eighth graders scoring at or above proficiency in math increased from 16% in 2005 to 28% in 2008, compared to the state rate of 54%.
- The Central Falls four-year high school graduation rate was 47% in 2009, well below the state rate of 75% and the lowest in the state.

### **Economic Well-Being**

Central Falls has the highest child poverty rate in the state at 41% of children ages birth to 18. More than half of these children were living in extreme poverty, which is defined as having a household income less than half the poverty line. In 2009, the federal poverty threshold was \$17,285 for a family of three with two children and \$21,756 for a family of four with two children. The extreme poverty level was \$8,643 for a family of three with two children and \$10,878 for a family of four with two children.

### **Teen Pregnancy and Parenting**

Teen pregnancy and parenting can be an important risk factor for future involvement with the child welfare system. National research shows that 80% of families in the child welfare system had their first child as a teenager. Between 2004 and 2008, Central Falls had the highest teen birth rates in the state for all age groups. The teen birth rate among girls ages 15-17 in Central Falls was 61.3 births per 1,000 teen girls, more than three times the state rate of 18.9 per 1,000 teen girls ages 15-17. For older teens (ages 18-19), the birth rate in Central Falls (136.3 births per 1,000 teen girls) is also more than three times the state rate (44.0).

Geller highlighted the need to prevent teen pregnancy and provide supports to teen parents, stating, "Teen pregnancy and parenting threaten the development of teen parents as well as their children. Teen pregnancy prevention is best addressed by using multiple approaches that meet the developmental needs of teens, keep youth engaged in school, provide opportunities to build career and leadership skills, and offer accurate information about and increased access to reproductive health care services."

### **Preventing Child Abuse and Neglect**

For more than a decade, Central Falls has consistently had one of the highest rates of child abuse and neglect in the state. In 2009, there were 107 Central Falls children who were victims of child abuse and neglect, a rate of 17.4 victims per 1,000 children under age 18, compared to 11.7 victims per 1,000 children statewide. In 2009 in Rhode Island, 78% of child abuse and neglect victims were victims of neglect, 13% physical abuse, 4% sexual abuse and 5% other

forms of neglect or abuse. “Research shows that high-quality, intensive family support programs during the first few years of life can improve child outcomes and reduce the risk of neglect and abuse,” stated Geller. “Local community efforts, including the Nurse-Family Partnership (NFP), an evidence-based nurse home visiting program for first-time parents, are now available in Central Falls to help parents who may be overwhelmed by multiple stressors, including inadequate income to meet basic needs and lack of social support networks. These stressors are sometimes complicated by depression, drug or alcohol abuse, domestic violence and untreated mental health issues. Committing resources to young, first-time parents can help strengthen parent-child relationships and offer the kind of support needed to keep these children from ending up in the child welfare system.”

### **Cash Assistance and Food Programs**

Programs for working and unemployed families, such as Rhode Island Works (formerly the Family Independence Program) and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly the Food Stamp Program), help to ameliorate the worst effects of poverty on child development by providing families with cash assistance and access to healthy meals. The Rhode Island Works Program serves as a critical safety net for children living in poverty, helping families transition to work by providing cash assistance and work supports, including subsidized child care, to families in need. In December 2009, more than two-thirds (67%) of the people who benefitted from Rhode Island Works were children under the age of 18, and more than half (54%) of those children were under age six. “Over the past two years, since the Rhode Island Works Program replaced FIP (the Family Independence Program) there has been a substantial decline in the number of families receiving cash assistance, the safety net for our state’s poorest families. Of 5,531 children under the age of 18 residing in Central Falls, two in five (41%) live in poverty, but just about 1 in 10 of these children (11%) received cash assistance in 2009.” stated Bryant.

Children living in poverty are less likely than their peers to receive adequate nutrition and access to healthy meals is critical for healthy child development. The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program helps low-income families obtain better nutrition through monthly benefits they can use to purchase food at retail stores and some farmers’ markets. In October 2009, 2,917 children in Central Falls participated in SNAP, up 43% from 2,038 in 2005. Children who have access to food programs – such as SNAP and School Breakfast – are less likely to

experience hunger and are more likely to have better nutrition, leading to improved educational performance.

In October 2009, an average of 654 (25%) low-income children in Central Falls participated in the Universal School Breakfast Program each day out of 2,600 children who were eligible for free or reduced-price breakfast. “The Central Falls School District has been taking active steps to increase participation in this program, including starting to serve breakfast in classrooms in some schools,” stated Geller. Research shows that children who eat breakfast have higher math and reading scores, fewer absences, improved attentiveness and lower incidences of social and behavioral problems.

### **Health**

Central Falls’ rate of low birthweight infants in 2004-2008 was 6.9%, lower than the state rate of 8.0% and the lowest in any core city. Between 2004 and 2008, Central Falls had an infant mortality rate of 8.4 infant deaths per 1,000 live births, the second highest rate in the state and much higher than the Rhode Island rate of 6.2 deaths per 1,000 live births. Early prenatal care is important to identify and treat health problems and influence health behaviors that can compromise fetal development, infant health and maternal health. Between 2004 and 2008, Central Falls had the second highest rate of women with almost 1 in 5 women (19%) receiving delayed or no prenatal care. Other health issues in Central Falls include relatively high rates of lead poisoning (4.8% confirmed positive with high lead levels) and the second highest rate of children hospitalized with a primary diagnosis of asthma at 2.7 per 1,000 children. Both of these issues are connected to housing quality as well as access to health care.

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Rhode Island KIDS COUNT is a statewide children’s policy organization that works to improve the economic well-being, health, safety, education and development of Rhode Island children.