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Kids Count releases latest data on Pawtucket

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PAWTUCKET — Rhode Island KIDS COUNT's annual compilation of facts and figures involving children's well being shows that a high number of Pawtucket youngsters are poor, but their educational outcomes and opportunities hold optimism.

At a meeting held Tuesday at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Stephanie Geller, Rhode Island KIDS COUNT policy analyst, presented "Pawtucket Data in your Backyard" from the organization's 2013 Factbook to an audience of community leaders and policy makers. The presentation was sponsored in partnership with the Pawtucket School Department Child Opportunity Zone.

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT is a statewide children's policy organization dedicated to improving the health, education, economic well being and safety of Rhode Island's children. The organization collects and disseminates data on the well being of local children and advocates for and facilitates the development of responsive policies and programs.

In her opening remarks, Geller said that the event highlighted "how community groups can come together and work to improve child outcomes in health, family economic well being, and education." Afterward, she led a discussion where audience members discussed ways to improve outcomes for children in Pawtucket.

Among the latest find-

ings, Geller said that although childhood poverty exists in every Rhode Island community, it is particularly concentrated in the core cities of Central Falls, Pawtucket, Providence and Woonsocket. She said that according to 2012 data, nearly one-third (29.4 percent or 4,790) of children in Pawtucket live in poverty.

In 2012, the federal poverty level was \$18,498 for a family of three and \$23,283 for a family of four. Of these, 1,881 children live in extreme poverty (11.3 percent of all children in Pawtucket and 39.3 percent of poor children). A family is considered to be in extreme poverty if its income is less than half the poverty threshold (\$9,249 for a family of three).

Geller also noted that Pawtucket is one of five school districts in Rhode Island with a district-wide Universal School Breakfast Program, which offers free breakfast to all children in elementary school classrooms, regardless of income. She noted, however, that despite the universal access, only 24 percent of low-income children take part in Pawtucket's school breakfast program, which is the lowest participation rates of all the core cities.

Geller said that Providence and Central Falls have been able to increase school breakfast participation rates by offering breakfast in the classroom at the start of the school day, and suggested that Pawtucket may be able to increase its participation rate by implementing this

practice.

On the educational spectrum, Geller stated that students who do not read proficiently by fourth grade have a much more difficult time with literacy and language development than their peers. On a positive note, she said that between 2005 and 2012, the percentage of fourth grade students in Pawtucket public schools who were proficient in reading increased from 48 percent to 60 percent.

Geller also said that between 2005 and 2012, the percentage of eighth grade students in Pawtucket schools who scored proficient in reading increased from 44 percent to 62 percent. Additionally, she said that Pawtucket's high school graduation rate is also seeing steady improvement. In 2012, 67 percent of the city's public school students graduated from high school in four years, an increase from 48 percent in 2007.

Geller reported, however, that improvement is needed with the city's youngest residents. She cited the importance of early prenatal care in identifying and treating health problems and to influence positive behaviors to promote fetal development, infant health and maternal health. Despite its importance, the percentage of Pawtucket mothers receiving delayed prenatal care has increased from 13.5 percent in 2002 to 2006 to 17.7 percent in 2007 to 2011, the third highest percentage in the state, she said.

Geller also stated that over the last two decades,

the teen birthrate has decreased across the nation, in Rhode Island and in Pawtucket. Despite these improvements, the teen birth rate per 1,000 teen girls ages 15 to 17 is substantially higher in Pawtucket (27.3) than the state as a whole (15.9), and the teen birth rate for older teens ages 18 to 19 in Pawtucket

is the third highest rate in the state (83.8 per 1,000 girls ages 18 to 19).

For more information, the entire 2013 Rhode Island Kids Count Factbook is available online at www.rikidscount.org.

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