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Rhode Island KIDS COUNT Releases Annual Factbook on the Status of Rhode Island's Children

New indicators on college preparation and access, disconnected youth and youth violence highlight the need to ensure that all children and youth have the opportunity to grow up to be healthy, contributing members of the community and the workforce.

Difficult economic climate and decreased state investments in children and families place children's healthy development at risk.

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**Warwick, RI, April 12, 2010** – Rhode Island KIDS COUNT released its 16<sup>th</sup> annual report on the well-being of Rhode Island's children at a policy breakfast attended by over 500 people, including members of the Rhode Island congressional delegation and community leaders and policymakers from education, health, business and human services. The event was held on **Monday, April 12, 2010 from 8:00 a.m. to 10:00 a.m. at the Crowne Plaza Hotel at the Crossings**, 801 Greenwich Avenue, Warwick, RI. The *2010 Rhode Island Kids Count Factbook* charts improvements and declines in the well-being of children and youth across the state and in each of Rhode Island's 39 cities and towns and provides the latest available statistics on 67 different aspects of children's lives, from birth through adolescence. The Factbook indicators are grouped into five interrelated categories: family and community, economic well-being, health, safety and education.

Elizabeth Burke Bryant, Executive Director of Rhode Island KIDS COUNT, opened the policy breakfast saying, "Investing in our children and youth is a priority for our future success as a state and as a nation. The only way to ensure the economic security of our nation – and the health of our communities – is to make sure that every child has what they need to reach their full potential. Children's health, education and safety cannot be ignored, even in a difficult economy."

Bruce Lesley, President of First Focus, delivered the keynote address at the policy breakfast. First Focus is a nationally recognized advocacy organization that works to make children and families a priority in federal policy and budget decisions. The organization promotes bipartisan policy solutions that will lead to improvements in child health, education, family economics, child welfare, and child safety. “The economic downturn has put millions of our children at risk of experiencing the pains of poverty. The effects of poverty last a lifetime by taking a toll on children’s emotional and developmental well-being,” said Lesley. “It is critical that leaders at the federal, state and local levels work together to ensure that healthy children and strong families are a priority within the budget process. When we are making decisions that affect children, we have only one chance to get it right – there are no ‘do-overs’ for childhood.”

### **PROVIDING FOR FAMILIES’ BASIC NEEDS**

Lesley noted, “Rhode Island’s leaders should be commended for continued investments in RIte Care health insurance and the efforts that have been made to ensure that all eligible children have access to nutritional foods through the SNAP program,” remarked Lesley. “Across the nation, Rhode Island is seen as a leader in supporting the healthy development of children. That said, there are some recent decisions that place children at risk. These include reduced investments in child care and changes to the Rhode Island Works program that make it difficult for families to meet their basic needs.”

***Child Care Subsidies:*** Bryant noted, “While the number of families in need of affordable, quality child care has increased, fewer and fewer children in Rhode Island have child care subsidies to ensure that they can access quality care, early learning and after school programs. Families rely on child care to enable them to work and to provide the early education experiences needed to prepare their children for school. The high cost of child care in Rhode Island puts quality care out of reach for many low-income families.” The number of child care subsidies increased steadily from 6,077 in 1996 to 14,333 in 2003 in order to meet the need for affordable, high quality child care. Since 2003, there has been a 48% decrease in the number of child care subsidies. Cuts in income eligibility for the Child Care Assistance Program, increased family co-payments, and the elimination of eligibility for children ages 13 to 15 has resulted in fewer families qualifying for subsidies. In December 2009, there were 7,471 children receiving child care subsidies in Rhode Island, down from 7,700 in December 2008.

***Rhode Island Works:*** “When unemployment or family crisis occurs, it is critical that families with children have access to a safety net that enables them to meet their basic needs. Yet, some of the

poorest families in the state no longer have access to cash assistance during this time of financial hardship,” noted Lesley. The *2010 Factbook* data show that of all children living in poverty, almost half (45%) live in extreme poverty with family incomes less than half the federal poverty line. Since 1996, the RI Works caseload has decreased by 61% from 18,428 to 7,224 mostly because of new state policies that limit eligibility and shorten time limits for children and families. In just the past year, the caseload decreased by 14% or 1,200 cases. An additional 950 cases are due to close on June 30, 2010 due to the new periodic time limit that limits assistance to no more than 24 months of assistance in any 60-month period.

***Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP):*** SNAP, formerly the Food Stamp Program, is an important anti-hunger program that helps individuals and families purchase food when they have limited income, face unemployment or reduced work hours, or experience a crisis. Children who receive SNAP benefits are less likely to go hungry than eligible children who are not enrolled. Between 2005 and 2009, the number of Rhode Island children receiving SNAP benefits increased by 53% from 35,168 to 53,632. These increases are a result of increased outreach efforts and changes in policies that make the program available to more families and that make it easier to apply. Bryant said, “The good news is that more children and families are accessing SNAP benefits so that they can purchase nutritious food in local retail stores. This benefits not only the families and children but also the local economy.”

***Housing and Homelessness:*** Inadequate, costly or crowded housing has a negative impact on children’s health, safety, and emotional well-being, and on a family’s ability to meet a child’s basic needs. From 2000 to 2008, the percentage of renters in Rhode Island who spent 30% or more of their household income on rent increased from just over one-third (35%) of renters to almost half (49%) of renters. Between 2000 and 2009, the average cost of rent in Rhode Island increased by 56%, from \$748 per month to \$1,170 per month (down 5% from 2008 when average cost of rent was \$1,232). From July 1, 2008 through June 30, 2009, children from 30 of Rhode Island’s 39 cities and towns used emergency shelter or transitional housing, and during the 2008-2009 school year, public school personnel identified 1,099 Rhode Island children as homeless.

## **SUPPORTING CHILDREN’S HEALTH AND EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT**

“Quality health care and early childhood experiences give children a foundation for success by supporting their physical, emotional, cognitive, and social development. The early years are learning years in which children have experiences that build the architecture of the developing brain. Children with a strong foundation are likely to succeed in school and in life,” said Bryant.

**Access to Health Insurance:** Children’s health insurance status is a major determinant of whether or not children have access to care. Rhode Island continues to be a leader among states in ensuring that children have health insurance. Between 2006 and 2008, in Rhode Island, 93.0% of all children had health insurance, compared to 89.2% of children nationally. Children who lack insurance coverage are more likely to lack a usual place of care, receive delayed care, have unmet medical and dental needs, and have fewer visits to the doctor and dentist. An estimated 18,141 children in Rhode Island remain uninsured, and almost three-quarters (13,078) of these children are eligible for RItE Care based on their family income but are not enrolled. “Ensuring that children have access to health insurance coverage and that all children have quality health care is a clear priority. We can help 13,000 more children get access to health insurance and needed care by helping their families enroll in RItE Care,” noted Ms. Bryant.

**Quality Early Care and Education:** Children who receive high-quality early care and education do better academically, emotionally, and socially than children who receive poor-quality care, and high-quality programs are particularly helpful for children from low-income families. High-quality child care and early education programs have low-staff to child ratios, educated and experienced caregivers and teachers, and safe and stimulating environments. In December 2009, there were 338 licensed early learning centers in Rhode Island, 30 of which had received accreditation from the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). As of December 2009, more than 20 child care centers/preschool programs and family child care homes were participating in BrightStars, Rhode Island’s Quality Rating and Improvement System for child care and early learning programs.

## **EDUCATION AND YOUTH DEVELOPMENT**

Bryant noted, “Rhode Island’s ability to meet the challenges of the 21st century depends on the quality of its education system. While there has been some progress in Rhode Island’s education results, it is critical that the pace and scope of improvements accelerate. More must be done to ensure that all Rhode Island schools provide excellent educational opportunities for our children and have the resources they need to prepare the future leaders of our communities, our state and our nation.”

**Reading and Math Skills:** Reading proficiency is fundamental to the development of academic competencies and basic life skills. In October 2009, 67% of Rhode Island fourth graders scored at or above proficiency in reading on the *New England Common Assessment Program* (NECAP) reading test, up from 60% in 2005. Eighth grade reading proficiency rates have also improved. In

October 2009, 70% of Rhode Island eight graders scored at or above proficiency in reading, up from 56% in 2005. Students with poor reading skills often experience difficulty completing their academic coursework, graduating from high school and finding and maintaining employment later in life. “Students in the core cities, where poverty rates are the highest, continue to have lower reading proficiency rates than elsewhere in the state. However, the gaps between the lowest income communities and the highest income communities are narrowing. While we are seeing improvements in reading proficiency rates throughout the state, the core cities are where we are seeing the largest gains,” said Bryant.

**Graduation Rates:** High school graduation is the minimum requisite for college and most employment. In Rhode Island, adults without a high school diploma are almost four times more likely to be unemployed than adults who have a bachelor’s degree. Of the Rhode Island class of 2009, 75% of students graduated on-time (in four years), 5% of students completed their GEDs within four years of entering high school, 6% were still in school in the fall of 2009 and 14% dropped out of school. Hispanic students had a 64% graduation rate, Native American students had a 71% graduation rate, Black students had a 67% graduation rate, Asian students had a 73% graduation rate and White students had an 80% graduation rate. The graduation rate for English Language Learner students was 63%, for students receiving special education services the rate was 59%, and for low-income students the rate was 63%.

#### **New Indicators in the 2010 Rhode Island Kids Count Factbook**

This year’s Factbook includes five new indicators, all of which provide new information about the education, safety, and well-being of Rhode Island’s children and youth.

**Public School Enrollment and Demographics:** For the first time, the Factbook provides an overview of the children enrolled in public schools in Rhode Island. Enrollment data show that on October 1, 2009, there were 145,118 students enrolled in Rhode Island public schools in grades pre-K through 12. The Factbook also provides breakdowns by income, race and ethnicity, and grade level for the state as a whole and for each of Rhode Island’s school districts as well as for charter schools, state-operated schools, and the Urban Collaborative Accelerated Program.

**Chronic Early Absence:** During the early elementary school years, children develop important skills and approaches to learning that are critical for ongoing school success. Children who are chronically absent in kindergarten (i.e., miss 18 or more days of school during the year) show lower levels of achievement in math, reading and general knowledge in first grade. During the 2008-2009

school year, 10% of Rhode Island children in grades K-3 were chronically absent. In Rhode Island's core cities, 16% of children in grades K-3 were chronically absent, compared with 7% in the remainder of the state.

**Youth Violence:** Youth violence refers to a variety of harmful behaviors that youth can experience as victims, witnesses or offenders that can cause emotional harm, injury, disability or death. Violence and the threat of violence have an impact on the well-being of youth, families, schools and communities, and can generate high social and economic costs. Effective youth violence prevention addresses both environmental and individual risk factors. In 2008, the Rhode Island juvenile arrest rate for serious violent crimes was 186 per 100,000 youth ages 10 to 17 compared to the U.S. rate of 306 per 100,000 youth. In 2008 in Rhode Island, there were 819 juvenile arrests for assault offenses and 161 juvenile arrests for weapons offenses. During the 2007-2008 school year, 12% of Rhode Island public high school students reported experiencing violence at school. These two measures reflect both youth violence that leads to arrest as well as violence between youth that may not come to the attention of the police.

**Disconnected Youth:** Youth who have weak connections to families, social networks and communities that can provide emotional and material support and guidance are at great risk as they transition to adulthood. In Rhode Island, youth at risk of being disconnected include youth in foster care, youth involved in the juvenile justice system, teen parents and high school dropouts. In Federal Fiscal Year 2009, 151 youth aged out of foster care without ever having gained a permanent placement through reunification, adoption, or guardianship. During 2009, 894 youth ages 12 to 22 were in the care or custody of the Rhode Island Training School. During 2009, there were 1,049 births to teen mothers under age 20 in Rhode Island. During the 2008-2009 school year, 2,917 students in grades 7<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> grades dropped out of Rhode Island public schools.

**College Preparation and Access:** Post-secondary education and training are increasingly critical in today's job market. While some students will choose to participate in service learning opportunities, technical training or obtain work experience before attending college, the rate of college entry immediately after high school can be an important measure of college access across states and communities. Just over half (55%) of Rhode Island seniors who graduated from high school in 2006 went directly on to a two-year or four-year college the next fall, compared with 62% nationally. Rhode Island ranks 43<sup>rd</sup> in the U.S. on this measure and 6<sup>th</sup> in New England (where 1<sup>st</sup> is best). All students, but especially low-income and traditionally underserved students, need academic, financial and social supports to prepare them for college and support their success.

### **Presentation of Factbook to Key Leaders**

Ms. Bryant stated, “Rhode Island families are struggling to make ends meet. Rhode Island Works, child care subsidies and the Food Stamp Program, now called SNAP, help the most vulnerable children and families in Rhode Island meet their basic needs during difficult times. It is more important than ever for Rhode Island families to have access to a safety net that helps them to protect their children from experiencing deep poverty, hardship and homelessness. Without the resources and supports that the safety net provides, poverty in childhood harms children’s social and emotional development, educational progress and long-term success.”

After highlighting the progress and challenges facing Rhode Island’s children, Bryant presented the *2010 Rhode Island Kids Count Factbook* to the state’s congressional delegation, the leadership of the General Assembly and other policymakers and community leaders. At the end of the breakfast, Bryant noted, “Rhode Island and our nation are facing difficult financial times and difficult decisions must be made about how to allocate resources. Data, such as we present in the *2010 Rhode Island Kids Count Factbook*, can help policy makers make informed decisions about what programs and policies are most important to ensuring the success of our children and our state.”

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