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Rhode Island KIDS COUNT

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

Fewer Rhode Island children are living in poverty.

Speakers reinforce the connection between public policy investments in adult education and training, health care, and child care that help to reduce child poverty and improve child outcomes.

Data show improvements in access to health care, dental care and better health outcomes for Rhode Island children and families.

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Warwick, RI, April 7, 2008 – Rhode Island KIDS COUNT released its annual report on the well-being of Rhode Island's children today. In releasing the latest available statistics on 62 different aspects of children's lives, from birth through adolescence, the annual *2008 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. 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 Breakfast stating, "The recent decline in the number of children living in poverty in Rhode Island is a sign of progress. Rhode Island's public policy investments in child care, health care and adult education and training have been the key to moving families up and out of poverty. In tough economic times, the only fiscally sound choice is to maintain investments in children and their families. Otherwise, the state will pay much higher costs down the road."

Bill Bentley, President and CEO of Voices for America's Children, focused his keynote address on Rhode Island's history of leadership in public policy investments in children and families. Mr. Bentley highlighted the progress that Rhode Island has made in key indicators of child well-being and cautioned the audience not to turn away from the imperative to meet the needs of all children. Mr. Bentley said, "When we are faced with difficult fiscal choices, there are few issues more pressing than ensuring that all of our children are safe, secure, and have the opportunity to reach their full potential." He highlighted challenges and progress in states across the nation, stating, "In Rhode Island and across this country, we must strengthen our commitment to each and every child – of all incomes, urban and rural, and of every race and culture. The future of this state – indeed, the future of our nation – rests on the decisions we make each day about how we meet the needs of children and youth and create the opportunities that will shape the rest of their lives."

Voices for America's Children is a national, nonpartisan, nonprofit child advocacy organization committed to speaking out for the well-being of children at the local, state and federal levels of government. With 60 member organizations in nearly every state, as well as the District of Columbia and the U.S. Virgin Islands, Voices advocates for effective public policies in order to improve the lives of all children throughout the United States. Rhode Island KIDS COUNT is a member of Voices for America's Children.

Child poverty rates decline between 2004 and 2006.

According to the *2006 American Community Survey* conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau, 15.1% (35,456) of Rhode Island's 234,711 children under age 18 lived below the federal poverty threshold. This is a significant decrease from 2004 when 21.0% (50,390) of Rhode Island children were living in families with incomes below the poverty threshold (\$16,705 for a family of three and \$21,027 for a family of four). This means that almost 15,000 fewer children were living in poverty in Rhode Island in 2006 compared with 2004.

Elizabeth Burke Bryant, Executive Director of Rhode Island KIDS COUNT, noted that the *2008 Rhode Island Kids Count Factbook* shows both progress and areas that need improvement. "Child poverty decreased in our state between 2004 and 2006, during a time when the state was making critical investments in child care, health care and adult education. It is imperative that we maintain and restore our critical investments in working families so that they can access the

child care, health care and education necessary for stable employment. Children need health care, high quality child care and early education to grow, develop and succeed in school.”

Families with incomes below 50% of the federal poverty threshold are considered to be living in extreme poverty. The extreme poverty level in 2007 was family income below \$8,353 for a family of three with two children and \$10,514 for a family of four with two children. In 2006, of the 35,456 children living below the poverty threshold in Rhode Island, 43% lived in extreme poverty. In total, an estimated 6.5% (15,160) of all children in Rhode Island lived in extreme poverty in 2006. This is a decrease from the previous year when 10% of Rhode Island children lived in extreme poverty.

Nationally and in Rhode Island, poverty disproportionately affects minority children and young children. In 2006 in Rhode Island, 36% of Black children and 36% of Hispanic children lived in poverty, compared to 14% of Asian children and 9% of White children. One third (12,723) of the children living in poverty in Rhode Island were children under the age of 6.

Enrollment in cash assistance drops by 46% over the past decade. Supports for working families ameliorate the worst effects of poverty, improve outcomes for children and help parents to find and maintain employment.

The Family Independence Program (FIP): Between 1996 and 2007 there was a 46% decline in the FIP caseload, from 18,428 cases to 9,993 cases with a reduction in state funding for cash assistance from \$58 million in 1996 to \$16 million in 2007. The Family Independence Program is Rhode Island’s welfare program. FIP helps families make successful transitions to work by providing the cash assistance and work supports (including food stamp benefits, health insurance, subsidized child care and education and training) that families need to maintain employment and provide for the healthy development of their children.

“We need to maintain our public policy successes”, said Bryant. “FIP has successfully helped families to move from welfare to work by providing parents with the tools they need to enter the job market and maintain employment.”

For those families who remain enrolled in FIP, research from a longitudinal study of FIP showed that recipients in the program faced numerous barriers to employment, including physical and

mental health problems, inability to find a job with full-time hours and transportation barriers. Many also have low educational levels, learning disabilities, and limited literacy skills.

FIP also provides a safety net for children whose parents cannot work due to a temporary or permanent disability, as well as for children who are being raised by their grandparents. In 2007 in Rhode Island, 16% (1,596) of families enrolled in FIP were headed by a parent who was permanently disabled and receiving Supplemental Security Income. An additional 11% (1,124) of families were exempt from the work requirements because of a temporary or permanent disability or because the parent was caring for a disabled family member.

Access to adult education, higher education and training. The Factbook highlighted that a growing number of jobs in today's labor market require higher-level skills and credentials than ever before. The skill levels of average high school dropouts will qualify them for 10% of all new jobs between 2000 and 2010, while people possessing the skills of typical high school graduates will qualify for 22% of all new jobs.

Parents enrolled in FIP make up a critical segment of the workforce that needs access to adult education and training. In Rhode Island, more than 2 in 5 parents (44%) enrolled in FIP reported not finishing high school and 36% of a recently tested cohort of FIP parents tested at or below a 6th grade reading ability.

Health Care: Rhode Island has long been a leader among states in ensuring that children have health insurance. In 2006 in Rhode Island, 93.6% of all children had health insurance. Two-thirds (64%) of children in Rhode Island have health insurance coverage through their parents' employer, 30% have health insurance through RIte Care and 6% are uninsured.

RIte Care is Rhode Island's health insurance program for children and families. RIte Care provides comprehensive, quality health care, with a focus on primary and preventive care. Children covered by RIte Care receive immunizations on time, get regular check-ups and are able to get the medicine they need when they are sick or to treat chronic illnesses, such as asthma. Research shows that insured children are more likely than uninsured children to receive preventive care or medical treatment for common conditions like ear infections, that if left untreated can have life-long consequences and lead to more serious health problems. Another positive outcome is that Rhode Island has the lowest child death rate for children ages 1 to 14 of any state in the nation.

“Rhode Island’s investment in RIte Care has yielded positive improvements in children’s health. It is critical that we continue to provide access to health insurance for Rhode Island’s children and families. Our RIte Care program is an excellent example of a health care program that has been resoundingly successful, efficient and cost-effective. Other states seek to replicate our success,” said Bryant.

Child care subsidies, Head Start and Comprehensive Child Care Services. “High quality child care and early learning programs for infants, toddlers and preschoolers have long-lasting positive effects on how children learn, develop, cope with stress, and handle their emotions,” stated Bill Bentley in his keynote remarks. “Investments in high quality child care and early education are some of the most cost-effective investments states can make – with both a short term pay-off in terms of healthy child development and a long-term pay off in terms of reduced special education and juvenile justice costs.”

Rhode Island’s investments in child care subsidies help low-income working families to afford the cost of child care. Child care subsidies broaden a family’s employment and child care options, including improving access to higher quality care. The number of children receiving child care subsidies increased steadily from 6,077 in 1996 to 14,333 in 2003. Since 2003, the number of families receiving child care subsidies has steadily declined to a low of 9,008 in 2007.

The Child Care Assistance Program was cut by \$17 million in last year’s legislative session; including a roll-back in eligibility for the program from 225% of the federal poverty level (FPL) to 180% of FPL, a delay of the scheduled market rate adjustment for reimbursement rates, reduced payments to before-school and after-school programs, and increased co-payments for families with incomes over 100% of FPL.

The *2008 Rhode Island Kids Count Factbook* shows that 2,718 children were participating in Head Start in the 2007-2008 school year, a decrease from 2,780 children in the 2004-2005 school year. Federal funding for Head Start has never been sufficient to enable all eligible children to be served; in Rhode Island, only 47% of eligible children receive Head Start. Rhode Island supplements federal funding with \$3.3 million in state funding to enable 400 additional children to participate in Head Start.

Under the 1998 Starting Right Law, Rhode Island began providing developmentally appropriate education and support services to children and families eligible for, but not receiving Head Start

services through the Comprehensive Child Care Services Program. The Comprehensive Child Care Services Program serves 203 children in families with incomes below the federal poverty line (eligible for Head Start) who are enrolled in child care programs. The program also provides enhanced services to an additional 783 children in families with incomes above the poverty line.

Both the state-funded Head Start slots and the Comprehensive Child Care Services Program have been proposed to be eliminated in the Governor's proposed FY '09 budget.

More attention is needed to ensure the safety, permanency and well-being of children in the child welfare system. Infants and toddlers comprise one-third of the caseload of the Rhode Island Department of Children, Youth and Families (DCYF), indicating the need for more supports for families with young children.

All children, particularly children who have been abused and neglected, need stability, permanency and safety in order to develop and flourish. Yet, Rhode Island children in out-of-home care frequently experience multiple placements, lose contact with family members and often have overlooked educational, physical and mental health needs. Key findings include:

- On December 31, 2007 in Rhode Island, 3,042 children under age 21 in the care of DCYF were in out-of-home placement, a decrease of 8% from last year when there were 3,311 children and youth in out-of-home placements.
- Of the children in out-of-home placements, 52% (1,585) were in a foster care home, 13% (392) were in a residential facility, 11% (348) were in a group home, 5% (156) were at the Rhode Island Training School for Youth, 4% (132) were in independent living or supervised apartments, 3% (106) were in temporary shelter care, 3% (82) were in a psychiatric hospital, medical hospital or substance abuse facility and 4% (117) were in other placements.
- On December 31, 2007, there were more than 1,000 infants and toddlers (birth through age 3) in the care of DCYF, comprising 31% of the caseload. Children under age one comprise the fastest growing segment of the child welfare population. Children under age 3 are also the most likely to experience recurrence of abuse and neglect.
- Of the 1,758 Rhode Island children who were victims of abuse or neglect during Federal Fiscal Year (FFY) 2007 (whether or not they were removed from the home), 13%

experienced one or more recurrences of abuse or neglect within 6 months, up from 11% in FFY 2003. The national standard is 6% or fewer. Of the 3,271 children who were victims of child abuse and neglect in 2007, 42% were under the age of 6.

Permanency for children and youth in the child welfare system: Effectiveness in achieving permanency, (i.e., reunification, adoption or guardianship) must include the interrelated measures of how quickly permanency is achieved, the proportion of children for whom it is achieved and the lasting success of the permanent placement. Key findings include:

- The percentage of children in the Rhode Island child welfare system who were reunified with their family of origin in less than 12 months increased from 68% in FFY 2003 to 73% in FFY 2007 (the national standard is 76%).
- The percentage of children in the Rhode Island child welfare system who were adopted in 24 months or less decreased from 51% in FFY 2003 to 31% in FFY 2007. While this is about the national standard (32%) it represents a significant increase in the number of children who wait more than 2 years before they are adopted.
- The longer children are in care, the more likely it is that they have multiple placements which compromises healthy child development and can result in long-term social, emotional and educational risks. Almost two-thirds (64%) of children who had been in DCYF care more than 24 months experienced 3 or more placements.
- In Rhode Island in FFY 2007, 18% of children who entered out-of-home placement were re-entering care within 12 months of a prior episode, down from 20% in FFY 2003. Despite this decrease, Rhode Island children re-enter care at a rate that is more than twice the national standard (9%). Achieving timely and successful permanency for children and youth requires providing access to substance abuse and mental health treatment, in-home services, parenting skills training and assistance with meeting basic needs (e.g., food, child care, housing, income, and health insurance).

Alternatives to Juvenile Incarceration: In 2007 there were 1,122 youth who were in the care and custody of the Rhode Island Training School during the course of the year. High-quality research-based alternatives to incarcerating youth are more successful in preventing recidivism and are significantly more cost-effective. Expanding Rhode Island's capacity to provide effective

community-based alternatives to incarceration at the Training School for youth who do not pose a danger to themselves or the community is essential.

High-quality education is critical for moving children and families out of poverty.

Educational attainment levels are linked to outcomes in all areas of child well-being, including economic well-being, safety and health. Research indicates that higher educational attainment leads to positive economic and social outcomes for individuals, families and communities.

Fourth-Grade Reading and Eighth-Grade Reading Skills: Reading proficiency is fundamental to the development of academic competencies and basic life skills. Students attending schools in the core city districts, low-income students, students receiving special education services and minority students are all less likely to score at or above proficiency in reading than their peers. In October 2007, 64% of Rhode Island 4th graders scored at or above the proficiency level on the New England Common Assessment Program (NECAP) reading test, up from 60% in 2005. In 2007, 28% of fourth-grade students receiving special education students were proficient in reading, compared with 71% of regular education students.

Low reading ability in eighth grade has long-term implications for students. Reading disabilities persist over time and even some successful early readers develop substantial difficulties with reading at older ages. Sixty-two percent of eighth graders score at or above proficiency on the 2007 NECAP reading test, compared with 56% in 2005. The eighth-grade reading proficiency rate in 2007 in the core cities was 41%, compared with 72% in the remainder of the state. Hispanic eighth graders had the lowest reading proficiency levels of any racial and ethnic group in the state at 39%, compared with 42% for Black students, 62% for Asian students and 70% for White students.

Fourth-Grade Math and Eighth-Grade Math Skills: The ability to understand and use mathematics is critical in life. Students must rely on math skills not only for advancing their education, but also in the course of daily activities. In October 2007, 54% of Rhode Island fourth graders and 48% of eighth graders scored at or above proficiency in math on the NECAP. Black and Hispanic students scored significantly lower than their White and Asian counterparts in both fourth-grade and eighth-grade assessments.

Attendance and Mobility Rates: An important aspect of students' access to education is the amount of time actually spent in the classroom. During the 2006-2007 school year, the high

school attendance rate in Rhode Island was 90%. However, during the same year, 14% of Rhode Island students were absent for 20 or more days.

Strong evidence exists that student mobility at all ages is a risk factor for low educational attainment and school failure. The overall school mobility rate for Rhode Island in the 2006-2007 school year was 18%. Mobility and attendance are strongly linked. Rhode Island students who did not change schools had a 92% attendance rate, compared with 82% of students who moved once, 79% for those who moves 2 or 3 times and 70% for those who moved 4 times.

Graduation rates: Young adults who drop out of high school are almost four times as likely to be unemployed as those with a high school degree. High school dropouts are at greater risk of being unemployed, living in poverty, receiving public assistance, being a teen parent, being incarcerated, and having poor health.

In 2007, Rhode Island's graduation rate was 89%. Minority students are more likely to drop out than their White non-Hispanic peers. In Rhode Island in 2007, Native American students had a 69% graduation rate, Hispanic students had an 82% graduation rate, Black students had an 86% graduation rate, Asian students had an 89% graduation rate and White students had a 91% graduation rate. Students in the core cities in Rhode Island had an overall graduation rate of 81%, compared with 93% in the remainder of the state. English Language Learner students, teen parents, students receiving special education services, and low-income students are all also more likely to drop out than their peers.

“Strategies that increase the academic proficiency and high school graduation rates of all students are vital to our efforts to reduce poverty and increase family economic security. The positive impact of education on earnings holds true for men and women across all racial and ethnic groups. Improving educational attainment for this generation of young people is a key strategy to improve child development outcomes, literacy and educational success in future generations,” stated Bryant.

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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.