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**Rhode Island KIDS COUNT Celebrates 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary and Releases Annual Factbook on the Status of Rhode Island's Children**

***Progress Seen in Reducing Teen Deaths, Child Deaths, and Births to Teens; More Families Have Access to the Health Care and Child Care that Supports Child Development***

Warwick, RI, April 5, 2004 - Rhode Island KIDS COUNT released its tenth annual report on the well-being of Rhode Island's children today. In releasing the latest available statistics on 54 different aspects of children's lives, from birth through adolescence, the annual *2004 Rhode Island KIDS COUNT Factbook* charts improvements and declines in the well-being of children 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. This year marks Rhode Island KIDS COUNT's tenth anniversary of working to improve the health, safety, education, economic security, and development of Rhode Island's children.

"For the last ten years, Rhode Island KIDS COUNT has worked on every facet of child well-being. Many of the statistics in today's book reflect the positive progress we are making because of Rhode Island's leadership in making critical investments in child care, health care, education, and supports for low-income families," announced Elizabeth Burke Bryant, Executive Director of Rhode Island KIDS COUNT. "We have worked to improve access to health insurance and child care for low-income Rhode Islanders, which has enabled many families to transition from welfare to work. More children have access to the health care and early education that is so critical to success in school and in life."

## **New Data on How Rhode Island Compares to Other New England States**

This year's *Factbook* contains information on Rhode Island's ranking among the six New England states: Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Vermont, and Rhode Island. These new rankings provide regional context to the data in this year's *Factbook* and give Rhode Island community leaders, policy makers and advocates an opportunity to see the conditions experienced by Rhode Island's children compared to children in the neighboring states. Rhode Island ranked worst in New England in five out of the twelve indicators containing this new ranking, including: children in poverty, births to teens, high school drop-outs, births to mothers with less than a high school education, and children living in single-parent families.

Ms. Burke Bryant noted, "All of these indicators point to the need for staying the course on our investments in health care, child care and welfare reform. The dire economic conditions in many neighborhoods argue for increased investments in the education and youth development programs that are the most effective tools to improve family stability and economic security." Over the past decade, Rhode Island's child poverty rate increased from 14% in 1990 to 17% in 2000. In 2000, more than 40,117 Rhode Island children under age 18 lived below the federal poverty threshold. The federal poverty threshold for 2003 was \$14,824 for a family of three with two children.

## **More Families Have Health Care and Child Care that Supports Child Development**

On nearly all health measures, Rhode Island's children are healthier today than when the first *Factbook* was released. "We have lower rates of teen deaths and child deaths than we did a decade ago. More women are receiving timely prenatal care and fewer teens are having babies. Rhode Island has the lowest rate of uninsured children in the country. Rhode Island's investment in RIte Care is paying off in improvements in children's health," noted Ms. Burke Bryant. This year, Rhode Island ranked number one best in the country for access to timely prenatal care. Nationally, 11.8% of children under age 18 were uninsured in 2002. Rhode Island has had a steady decline in the number of children without insurance, from 10.9% in 1995 to 4.3% in 2002, a reduction of 60%.

More after-school learning programs are available to school-age children and youth from ages 6 to 12, increasing from 6,692 licensed child care slots in 1996 to 14,236 in 2003. The number of infants, preschoolers and school-age children receiving child care subsidies has more than doubled, from 6,077 in 1996 to 13,666 in 2003, enabling more children to be in safe learning

environments while their parents work. Child care subsidies broaden a family's employment options and child care options, including improving access to higher quality care. Child care subsidies are essential for low-income families and help to alleviate the financial burden of child care. In December 2003, 72% of all child care subsidies in Rhode Island were being used by low-income working families. Almost one-quarter (22%) were used by families enrolled in the Family Independence Program who were working or receiving education and training. Between 1994 and 2003, the number of children and adults enrolled in the Family Independence Program has dropped by 38%. Access to child care is a key factor in maintaining stable employment.

Elizabeth Burke Bryant noted, "We must celebrate the fact that Rhode Island leaders recognize that investments in health care and in high-quality learning opportunities for infants, preschoolers, school-age children and teens are critical economic development tools. Healthy children who are in high-quality, well-designed preschool and after-school programs have better peer relations, emotional adjustment, social skills, academic performance, attendance and conduct in school than children who do not. They are less likely to use drugs or become teen parents or become involved in criminal activities. They are more likely to grow up into productive adults who contribute to the community."

### **Two New Indicators and New Information on Racial and Ethnic Disparities**

Two new indicators are included in the *2004 Rhode Island KIDS COUNT Factbook: Grandparents Caring for Grandchildren and Gun Violence*. In addition, an expanded indicator on racial and ethnic disparities points out the need for continued attention to closing the gap in child outcomes that results from the high poverty rates and limited opportunities available to many children and youth of minority racial and ethnic backgrounds.

*Grandparents Caring for Grandchildren.* Grandparent caregivers are an important source of stability for children whose parents are unemployed, abusive, neglectful, incarcerated, ill, or are in a substance abuse program. Nationally, grandparents financially responsible for their grandchildren make up 7% of family households with children. In Rhode Island, there are 5,060 grandparents who are financially responsible for their grandchildren, making up 4% of all family households with children. Nearly half (49%) of Rhode Island grandparents who are financially responsible for their grandchildren have been responsible for their grandchildren for three or more years. Grandparents who are financially responsible for their grandchildren often face particular challenges because they do not receive the support or services that they need and for which they are eligible. Nearly all grandparent caregivers are eligible for foster care payments or child-only

Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) payments, as well as Medicaid for the children in their care, but few receive this assistance.

*Gun Violence.* Gun violence threatens the psychological, emotional, and social well-being of individuals and families. Of the six New England states, Rhode Island has the second highest rate of handgun homicide of victims under 18 years of age. Of the 36 gun deaths between 1998 and 2002 in Rhode Island, 83% were to teens ages 15 to 19 and 17% were to children under the age of 15. Between 1998 and 2002 in Rhode Island, there were also 63 hospitalizations of children under 20 years of age for firearm-related injuries. Of these, 87% were to teens ages 15 to 19 and 13% were to children younger than age 15. Early intervention with mental health issues, after-school programming that keep kids safe and involved, and increased economic opportunities for the child and family are key factors in reducing gun violence.

*Racial and Ethnic Disparities.* Although there have been substantial improvements in child well-being over the past century across racial and ethnic lines, large disparities exist between White, non-Hispanic children and children from other racial and ethnic groups. The expanded indicator in the *2004 Rhode Island KIDS COUNT Factbook* includes new data on economic, health, safety and education outcomes by race and ethnicity. Nearly two-thirds of Rhode Island's poor children are children of minority racial and ethnic backgrounds. According to Census 2000, 8% of all White, non-Hispanic children in Rhode Island were poor, compared with 47% of all Hispanic children, 38% of all Black children, 26% of all Asian children, and 51% of all Native American children. Rhode Island's poverty rates for Hispanic and Asian children are significantly higher than the U.S. rates for these racial and ethnic groups.

### **Youth Leaders Offer a Call to Action**

To celebrate the tenth anniversary, Rhode Island KIDS COUNT invited youth leaders Randy Vargas and Jennifer Rossi to give remarks about the importance of reaching out to youth and creating leadership opportunities. Randy Vargas, currently a student at Boston University, is majoring in psychology and sociology. He is a 2000 Classical High School graduate and former board member at Youth in Action. While still in high school, he was instrumental in establishing the Art Park in Providence's South Side. Vargas focused his comments on how quality after-school programs helped him achieve in school and afterwards. "It is so important that young people are exposed to leadership opportunities and know that they can make a difference in their community. Everybody has a contribution to make."

Jennifer Rossi is a student at Providence College. She is a former Board Co-Chair of Youth in Action and is currently their Business Development Director. While a student at Classical High School, Ms. Rossi was a YEAH Team Member (Youth Educating About Health) which reaches about 400 youth per year. She was instrumental in launching the Mental Health and Wellness Initiative at Hope High School, serving as the chair of the youth advisory committee. “There are so many different factors affecting our youth today. It is important that they have places to spend time where they are learning and contributing. My work with Youth in Action provided that outlet for me and so many other youth in this area, but more needs to be done. We need to make sure that all children have a safe place to learn and grow – within the school as well as during the many hours when school is not in session.”

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

After highlighting the progress and challenges facing Rhode Island’s children, Bryant presented the *2004 Rhode Island KIDS COUNT Factbook* to the Governor, the congressional delegation, the leadership of the General Assembly, and other community leaders. “I am so proud of the strides that we have made on behalf of children in Rhode Island in the past ten years, but we still have work to do. We must continue our investments in child care and health care, and strive to provide all children with high-quality education from the preschool years through high school and into college. We must tap into the energy and creativity of our youth and ensure that all children and teens have opportunities to develop their talents in school and during the after-school hours. Rhode Island KIDS COUNT is committed to sustaining the gains we have made together and to working with each of you to make additional progress so that all children have what they need to thrive. It is my hope that ten years from now we will be celebrating new accomplishments with the next generation of youth leaders here in Rhode Island.”

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Rhode Island KIDS COUNT is a statewide children’s policy organization that works to improve the economic security, health, safety and education of Rhode Island children. The organization is one of fifty state-level organizations that works in partnership with the Annie E. Casey Foundation to track the social condition of children at the state and local level across the country. The annual *Rhode Island KIDS COUNT Factbook* is produced by Rhode Island KIDS COUNT in partnership with The Rhode Island Foundation, Brown University’s A. Alfred Taubman Center for Public Policy and American Institutions, The Poverty Institute at Rhode Island College School of Social Work and United Way of Rhode Island.