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## For Immediate Release

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### **Rhode Island KIDS COUNT Presents: *Woonsocket Data in Your Backyard***

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**Woonsocket, RI, September 19, 2006** – Rhode Island KIDS COUNT Policy Analyst, Kat Keenan, presented data from the *2006 Rhode Island KIDS COUNT Factbook* to an audience of community leaders. As part of the *Data in Your Backyard Series*, the presentation included indicators of child well-being in Woonsocket and a community discussion about the data's implications. The presentation took place on **Tuesday, September 19<sup>th</sup> from 9:00 a.m. to 10:30 a.m. at the Chaplin-Perez Center, 37 Center Street, Woonsocket, RI.**

### **Family and Community**

According to *Census 2000*, there were 11,155 children under the age of 18 living in Woonsocket, an increase of 5% from the last decennial census. Of these children, 35% are under the age of 6. Woonsocket continues to struggle with high rates of childhood poverty. Data from *Census 2000* reveal that Woonsocket has the third highest child poverty rate in the state at 32%, compared to 17% for Rhode Island. Of the 3,494 children living below the poverty threshold in Woonsocket (\$15,735 for a family of three), more than half (59%) live in extreme poverty, which is defined as income at or below half of the federal poverty line (or \$7,868 for a family of three).

Kat Keenan noted, "While children in poverty are vulnerable to a range of health and education problems, we know what needs to be done to improve outcomes for poor children. When communities offer intensive support for new parents, provide access to health and child development services, and ensure that all children have high quality education, children are more likely to achieve in school and in life. We must do what it takes to make sure that children living in poverty have the supports and resources they need to succeed."

## **Preventing Child Abuse and Neglect**

Though Woonsocket has seen some encouraging decreases in the child abuse and neglect rate since its peak in 1999, Woonsocket continues to have the highest rate in the state. In 2006 there were 16.6 indicated child abuse and neglect investigations per every 1,000 children, compared to 7.5 indicated investigations per 1,000 children statewide. “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 Elizabeth Burke Bryant, Executive Director of Rhode Island KIDS COUNT. “Local community efforts are being implemented in Woonsocket to improve parenting and provide support to families. One notable example in Woonsocket is the Family Support Network spearheaded by Family Resources Community Action and Connecting for Children and Families. This effort is a critical first step in reducing child abuse and neglect in the city and in ensuring the health, safety and well-being of the children and families of Woonsocket.”

## **Health**

The data show that Woonsocket continues to experience poor access to prenatal care and high infant mortality rates. 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. In Woonsocket, the rate of women receiving delayed prenatal care decreased 25% (from 21% to 15.7%) between 1991-1995 and 2000-2004. Yet, in 2000-2004, Woonsocket had the highest rate in the state of women who do not access timely prenatal care. In addition, between 1997-2001 and 2000-2004 the Woonsocket infant mortality rate almost doubled, from 4.4 deaths per 1,000 births to 8.0 per 1,000 births.

## **Education**

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT presented data from the Rhode Island Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. Data on student test scores were not available when the *Factbook* was released, but were included in the presentation. The data indicate the need for continued emphasis and more intensive strategies to improve educational outcomes in Woonsocket, the core cities and the state as a whole.

Highlights of the education data include:

- The Woonsocket mobility rate for school age children was 22%, higher than the state rate of 16%. In Rhode Island, students who move are absent more frequently and are more likely to perform worse on standardized tests than children who have not experienced mobility.

- In 2005 Woonsocket had the third lowest high school attendance rate (86%) in the state. The state attendance rate was 90%. The amount of time actually spent in the classroom is an important aspect of students' access to education. Youth with poor school attendance are at increased risk of dropping out.
- Woonsocket had the third lowest percentage of students who were proficient in Reading (39%), the third lowest percentage of students proficient in Mathematics (32%), and the lowest percentage of students proficient in Writing (26%), compared to other school districts in Rhode Island.
- In 2005, Woonsocket High School was classified as in need of improvement/insufficient progress. This classification is based on 21 annual targets for each school. Actual school improvements may exceed those described by the classifications as schools may achieve or make significant gains in most, but not all, of the 21 targets.
- In 2005 in Woonsocket, 70% of all students graduated from high school, compared to 85% for the state as a whole. Woonsocket had the third lowest graduation rate in the state. Young adults who drop out of high school are three times more likely to be unemployed or earn lower wages than those with a high school degree.

There is clearly much progress needed if all children are to enter school ready to learn and leave school prepared to lead productive lives. Data were presented on several key programs that research shows lead to increased school readiness and school success, including full-day kindergarten, early care and education and high performing schools. "While access to these programs is increasing, there is the critical need to make sure that programs are of high quality and reach the most vulnerable families," stated Kat Keenan, Policy Analyst at Rhode Island KIDS COUNT. She closed the forum, noting, "The children most at risk of not achieving their full potential are children who live in poverty. Access to a quality education, from early childhood through college, is the one clear pathway out of poverty. We must increase access to family support programs, quality early education programs and high quality schools if we are to truly reduce the child poverty rates and give every child in Woonsocket the opportunity to succeed as adults."

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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.