

## PUBLIC POLICY

# RIPEC teams with United Way on study of safety net

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There is always a lot of talk about the assistance the needy receive in Rhode Island, whether these benefits are too much, too little, too expensive, too easy to get. Such talk is usually uninformed because detailed information on the scope and particulars of the state's social services safety net is often difficult to find.

That's about to change.

The **Rhode Island Public Expenditure Council (RIPEC)** and the **United Way of Rhode Island** are teaming up to conduct what may be the first study of its kind in the state, a comprehensive data-based look at the social safety net intended to keep individuals from falling into abject poverty.

Conducted in an "independent and unbiased way," the study by two of the state's most respected organizations will be a "comprehensive analysis" of the existing social services safety net and intended for "for policymakers, taxpayers and providers," according to Susanne Greschner, director of policy and research at RIPEC.

Slated for completion in late fall, the study comes at an especially critical time for Rhode Island, plagued with a host of fiscal ills including high unemployment, a growing number of real estate foreclosures, spiraling costs of health care and public transportation, and a dwindling and aging population.

Greschner noted there is a lot of "anecdotal" evidence regarding social service programs in the state, "but

nobody really knows for certain" how effective and necessary the programs are because no one has assessed them or the clients they serve. "This is very timely," she said of the study.

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**ANTHONY MAIONE**

UNITED WAY  
president and CEO

Greschner and Allan Stein, executive vice president for public policy at United Way, agreed with the idea that the study will be similar to those prepared each year by **Rhode Island Kids Count** on the status of children in the state. The Kids Count studies provide a wealth of up-to-date data and statistics on Rhode Island children, without drawing political or governmental conclusions. Conclusions and solutions are left to policymakers and lawmakers.

"This will be a collection of broad-based data," Stein said. "We will be working with state departments and other organizations to get a sense of what the [needy] population looks like and what level of need exists."

The study will comprise four components:

- The demand for safety net services, including statistics on the unemployed, the disabled, the homeless and those without health insurance, for example.

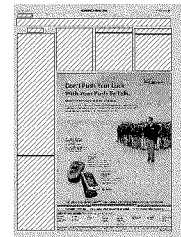
- The cost of these services. "We need to better understand what is spent on these programs," Greschner said.

- Comparison with other New England states and possibly other states in the Northeast.

- The outcome. According to Greschner, the final part of the study will answer such questions as: What outcomes do we expect from a safety net? Are there appropriate needs-testing criteria in place for these programs? What consequences would changes in the programs have to those in need and to other programs, and to what degree?

Besides state departments and other government repositories of information, "stakeholders" will be consulted, RIPEC and United Way said in a joint news release. Stakeholders would include health care providers and consumers, school-based agencies and representatives of the homeless, the uninsured and the under-insured.

"We hope to generate discussion on safety net issues," Stein said. "This certainly is a study we want to share," with policymakers and lawmakers in particular. He noted that Rep. Steven M. Costan-



tino, chairman of the House Finance Committee, suggested to him a few months ago that a review be done of the state's social services safety net.

Greschner hopes that the study will become the basis for decisions next year regarding the fiscal 2010 state budget.

Greschner said she's unaware of a similar study having ever been done in Rhode Island. "I haven't seen it done, not in one study that compiles all the data in one place," she said.

John C. Simmons, RIPEC executive director, said he welcomes the study because the state's social services safety net "needs to be examined in some detail. We are looking forward to working with United Way on this very important and

timely project, which will provide decision-makers with the information needed to make policy choices that are based on clearly articulated long-term policy goals and objectives," he said.

"It is going to be a very difficult year for Rhode Island's working poor and at-risk populations," said Anthony Maione, president and CEO of United Way. "Within the context of the state's current fiscal challenges, it is imperative that we define the appropriate safety net that we as a society must provide our vulnerable citizens." ■