

COMMENTARY

# In a season of abundance, too many Rhode Islanders struggle to afford food

Food insecurity is not only inequitable in the short term but has long-term implications, Blue Cross & Blue Shield of Rhode Island president and CEO says.

By **Martha L. Wofford** Updated November 29, 2022, 6:00 a.m.



A woman packs food for the annual Thanksgiving food distribution at a food pantry in Pittsfield, Mass. BEN GARVER/ASSOCIATED PRESS

The holiday season is upon us, a time when food is a big part of what brings us together in celebration.

Unfortunately, that is not the reality for many families in Rhode Island, some of whom must turn to food pantries as inflation has increased the cost of groceries. For too many Rhode Islanders, it can be a struggle to afford and gain access to high-quality, nutrient-rich food, and we should reflect on the implications.

Not only is this inequitable in the short term, but it also has long-term implications. What has become increasingly clear is that food is more than fuel and more than celebration: Food is health.

Just two weeks ago, Blue Cross & Blue Shield of Rhode Island and the Brown University School of Public Health held a forum to release the [latest RI Life Index data](#). The Index measures Rhode Islanders' perceptions of numerous quality-of-life issues that impact health. Unsurprisingly, the 2022 results were discouraging. With inflation driving up prices, the score on access to nutritious foods declined 4 points to 69 on a scale of 100. And it is only 64 for the core cities of Central Falls, Pawtucket, Providence, and Woonsocket, where more than 20 percent of children live below the poverty line.

It is critical that we expand access to high quality, nutrient-rich food. That's why this fall BCBSRI partnered with Providence schools, the R.I. Department of Education and We Share Hope to open a food pantry on the premises of a public school — Providence's Mount Pleasant High School — and why we are longtime supporters of the Rhode Island Community Food Bank and their vision of “a state where no one goes hungry.”

Though organizations, including BCBSRI, donate meals during the holidays, we recognize that access to healthy food can't be occasional or intermittent. Built into our health plans are year-round benefits to support members' food needs — all aimed at enhancing quality of life, improving health outcomes, and reducing overall health care costs for the entire state.

For our most vulnerable population — older and chronically ill members who qualify for both Medicare and Medicaid — we are now regularly delivering supplemental groceries to their doors, in partnership with Millonzi Fine Catering, a proud Rhode Island company. The deliveries arrive at least once a month and include fresh produce and some prepared foods, including locally sourced items. Starting in January, these members can also use a benefit card to subsidize the cost of groceries at supermarkets or neighborhood stores with culturally appealing foods. Additionally, all our Medicare Advantage plans offer free meal deliveries — a week’s worth of food — for those returning home from the hospital or a skilled nursing facility.

We believe that every Rhode Islander should have access to high-quality, affordable and equitable care — including access to food — and we look forward to working with the community to improve food security. And in this season of gratitude and grace, we must remember that nutritious food is a basic need and essential to creating a healthy Rhode Island for everyone.

*Martha L. Wofford is president and CEO of Blue Cross & Blue Shield of Rhode Island. She is a member of the board of directors of the Rhode Island Community Food Bank.*

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