Measuring Economic Progress in 2021

EPI led Raising RI, a coalition of over 40 community, faith-based, advocacy, and provider organizations in a campaign to improve the economic security of families participating in the RI Works program, the state’s cash assistance and work-readiness program for families. The Coalition succeeded in securing an increase to the monthly benefit which had not been adjusted for 30 years. Thousands of families benefitted from a 30% increase, which while not sufficient to lift families out of poverty, helps to prevent them from falling farther behind. Other enacted improvements include the extension of the yearly clothing allowance to all children in the family and exclusion of earned income for 6 months when a parent starts a job.

The Fight for 15 campaign, in which EPI has been an active participant, finally achieved victory this year as Rhode Island became the 8th state in the nation to pass a $15 per hour minimum wage. The minimum wage will increase to $12.25 on January 1, 2022 (from $11.50) and will reach $15 by 2025.

EPI played an important role in preserving an estimated $47.8 million in general revenue through the state’s partial break from federal tax rules on forgiven Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) loans. With the assistance of the Center on Budget & Policy, we provided information to the Governor’s Office and testified in the House and Senate Finance Committees in support of decoupling. Our analyses were also featured in the Providence Journal and the Boston Globe.

EPI helped increase the number of weeks of paid leave workers can take to be at home caring for a loved one or bonding with a new child from 4 to 6 weeks by 2023 (5 weeks in 2022).
I rely on EPI’s analysis to support my policy decision-making because I trust EPI and I know the effort they put into making sure their work is credible and reliable.

- State Representative Rebecca Kislak

EPI responded to the COVID-19 pandemic by producing written materials and webinars to ensure that individuals and community helpers knew about the many types of federal assistance and how to access these benefits. We wrote and distributed fact sheets in English and Spanish about federal stimulus payments; special SNAP benefits; income replacement; health coverage; and other programs to meet basic needs. We coordinated with immigrant-serving organizations to ensure that this particularly vulnerable population knew how to access COVID testing, health care, and programs to meet basic needs. A special page on our website directed readers to these COVID-related materials.

On April 27, the Institute hosted a Zoom conversation "Building a Better Rhode Island" with Naomi Walker, Director of EARN, a nationwide network of research, policy, and advocacy organizations, of which EPI is a member, that promotes an economy that works for everyone. The conversation was convened in support of the Revenue for RI campaign, co-led by EPI. Ms. Walker discussed raising revenue by increasing taxes on the wealthiest individuals and its importance to tax fairness and state economic security.
The RI Foundation (RIF) asked EPI to co-staff the "Make It Happen" Initiative along with the RI Public Expenditure Council. RIF convened a fifteen-person steering committee to develop recommendations for using the $1.2B in new American Rescue Plan Act funds. EPI staff have participated in interviews with 45 local leaders, reviewed and organized input from the community, and developed proposals for review and approval from the steering committee. A report will be provided to state policymakers and the public in October.

In December 2020, the Institute released the 2020 Rhode Island Standard of Need (RISN), our biennial report which provides a more accurate measure of economic well-being than the commonly used, but outdated, Federal Poverty Level (FPL). In this edition, we also addressed the racial and ethnic inequities in the ability of Rhode Island families to meet their basic needs and showed how additional government support helped essential and other workers and their families during the COVID-19 pandemic. The RISN and its infographic received a lot of attention from the local media and were used during the legislative session to advocate for the minimum wage increase and other issues.

The Revenue for RI Coalition continues its work to raise an estimated $128.2 million in revenue by increasing taxes on a portion of the income of the wealthiest one percent (5,000) of Rhode Island taxpayers. The campaign picked up significant traction over the last year with much media attention and public support. EPI also pushed to highlight this campaign as a racial equity issue, unveiling an infographic in the Spring that highlighted racial and ethnic disparities in income in Rhode Island. We also developed a short piece to explain to small businesses why the proposal would not affect them negatively, but instead support business growth and job creation with the additional revenue.

WHAT'S NEXT?

We expect to be working on similar policy proposals in the coming year but be sure to look out for some new upcoming events and publications!

- September 30th - Meeting Basic Needs in the COVID-Changing World
- 2022 Rhode Island Candidate Issue Brief
MEET OUR BOARD

FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: JILL BECKWITH, PAOLA FERNANDEZ, ROBERT FERREIRA (TREASURER), ERIC HIRSCH, PAULA HODGES, CAROLYN MARK (CHAIR), HUGH MINOR (SECRETARY) QUADRY OLÁEKEN, JESSICA HOLDEN SHERWOOD (VICE CHAIR), ASHLEY SANCHEZ, SHIDEH SHAFIE, MATTHEW SHUMATE, ALEJANDRO TIRADO, KILAH WALTERS-CLINTON

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