



TAILLIGHTS OR HEADLIGHTS?

Picture the taillights on Interstate 95. Thousands of families, graduates, taxpayers, business men and women, and investors leaving Rhode Island. Instead of applying their talents and skills, their degrees, and their wealth to help turn around our Ocean State home, they are fleeing for greener pastures.

Imagine, instead, the headlights of these same people, and tens of thousands of others, streaming back into Rhode Island to raise their families and to build their careers.

No single indicator should be of more importance to lawmakers and civic leaders than whether or not our state is retaining and attracting talented and productive people. The opportunity for prosperity is a primary factor in the migration of families from state to state. In this regard, our Ocean State is losing the race.



Far too many Rhode Islanders are fleeing our state, leaving a swath of empty chairs at our family dinner tables. If we want to keep our loved ones at home with us and give those who have left a reason to return, we must take bold action to reform our approach to public policy and to civil society.

Imagine our Ocean State as a more attractive home and destination of choice for families: A state that offers financial security today and opportunity for prosperity tomorrow, where individuals and businesses are successful in increasing the overall wealth of our state’s economy and enhancing the quality of life for all Rhode Islanders.

When it comes to overall family prosperity, Rhode Island ranks 48th in the nation, according to new research analyzing a broad range of family-related data — the 2016 Family Prosperity Index (FPI). It’s time to examine why this is the case and what political and civic leaders can do to address Rhode Island’s low ranking.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Every state strives to identify and implement the best approach to creating a productive public-private environment where individuals and families can thrive. Over recent decades, Rhode Island has implemented comparatively generous public assistance programs as shown by its poor 2016 FPI rankings on the Medicaid (48th) and government burden (37th) sub-indexes. While such programs are well-intentioned, what if we were to realize that this long-held public policy approach — *which mainly seeks to address the material hardships of our state's residents* — has actually led to the unintended consequence of diminishing opportunity and overall prosperity of families by ignoring their cultural and familial needs? What if this omission served to diminish the overall well-being of many families and, simultaneously, forced other Rhode Islanders to migrate to states that offer an improved sense of hope and prosperity?

The government's attempt to fight poverty, via a massive system of social welfare and social engineering programs, has crowded out the roles that the private sector and civil society have traditionally played in facilitating prosperity and a sense of personal dignity by creating a sense of over-reliance on government assistance. What if we actually reduced the opportunity for upward family mobility?