Testimony Regarding the Department of Human Services Budget
House Finance Committee, Subcommittee on Human Services
July 30, 2020

The Raising Rhode Island Coalition, facilitated by The Economic Progress Institute, is committed to improving the economic security of families receiving Rhode Island Works benefits. The Coalition is comprised of community, healthcare, social service, policy, religious and advocacy organizations that serve families with low incomes. A list of the organizational members is attached to this testimony and there are 200+ individuals who support the Coalition's efforts.

RI Works is our state's safety net and workforce development program for low-income children and parents. It currently serves around 3,500 families, including 8,500 individuals, 72% of whom are children. RI Works is funded through the federal Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) block grant. Rhode Island receives $96 million annually in federal funds and must spend $64 million annually in state funds as a "maintenance of effort" requirement. Presently, less than one-quarter of the federal funds are spent directly on families receiving RI Works benefits, and no general revenue funds are appropriated to the program.

The monthly benefit paid to families enrolled in RI Works averages $6/person/day. The benefit has not been adjusted in close to 30 years and is just 30% of the federal poverty level (FPL), leaving children and their parents and caregivers living in deep poverty.

The only other income support for these families is a yearly clothing allowance for school-aged children of $30. The Department of Human Services 2021 budget increases the one-time payment to $100. However, the statute (RIGL 40- 5.2-33) permits DHS to provide the payment only to 'school aged children'. There are 1,884 infants and toddlers who are left out in the cold. It would cost under $200,000 to provide the one-time $100 clothing allowance to these youngsters. This is a small fraction of the $96 million federal TANF block grant, and would provide some financial relief to families who are struggling to make ends meet.

We also ask the members of the subcommittee to consider increasing the RI Works monthly benefit as proposed in legislation submitted by Representative Morin (H-7345). The bill would increase the monthly benefit from 30% FPL to 50% FPL over the next two years, with an increase to 40% in FY 2021. When the benefit was last increased, it lifted families out of deep providing a benefit equal to 60% FPL. Rhode Island is the only New England state that has not raised the monthly benefit amount since 1991. Consequently, the payment is the lowest in the region – which means Rhode Islanders receiving cash assistance are living in the deeper poverty than their other New England counterparts.

We encourage the members of the subcommittee to take the lead in addressing the egregious poverty in which RI Works families are living. We recognize the challenges for managing the 2021 budget shortfall. We urge you to consider how the recent economic insecurity has impacted families living below the poverty level and provide some relief for children living in impoverished conditions in our state, by increasing the benefit amount. At such a minimal cost, the legislature should at least increase the clothing allowance and provide the once-annual payment to all children in the family, so that infants and toddlers may have access to funds for clothes too.

Raising Rhode Island Coalition Members

- Center for Southeast Asians
- Community Action Partnership of Providence
- Community Care Alliance
- Comprehensive Community Action Program
- Cranston Clergy Association
- Direct Action for Rights and Equality
- Domestic Violence Resource Center of South County
- Dorcas International Institute of Rhode Island
- East Bay Community Action Program
- Facilitate Change, LLC
- Foster Forward
- Genesis Center
- Jonnycake Center of Peace Dale
- Neighborhood Health Plan of Rhode Island
- Newport Partnership for Families
- Providence Public Library
- ResCare Workforce Services
- Rhode Island Coalition for Children and Families
- Rhode Island Community Action Association
- Rhode Island Health Center Association
- Rhode Island Kids Count
- Rhode Island National Organization for Women
- Scandinavian Church
- Sojourner House
- St. Paul Catholic Church
- Temple Sinai
- The Economic Progress Institute
- The Latino Policy Institute
- The Rhode Island Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics
- The Rhode Island Coalition Against Domestic Violence
- The Rhode Island Interfaith Coalition to Reduce Poverty
- The Womxn Project
- Tri-County Community Action Agency
- United Way of Rhode Island
- Washington County Coalition for Children
- Westbay Community Action
- Woodridge Congregational Church
- Working Cities Newport