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From: Taryn Mazza <tmazza@wrcnbc.org>
Sent: Thursday, March 21, 2024 11:57 AM
To: House Finance Committee
Subject: Tonight's hearing FY2025

March 21, 2024

House Finance Committee Members:

I am writing to you in support of additional funding for the Health Equity Zones (HEZ), an initiative of the Rhode Island Department of Health (RIDOH), serving Rhode Island's most vulnerable residents by utilizing a unique, community-driven approach to improving the overall health and resilience of communities throughout the state. The proposed budget lacks adequate support for these collaboratives that have become a critical part of the state's public health infrastructure.

Here in Newport, critical issues we work on are

- Housing
- Food Access
- Resident engagement

In addition to hosting regular meeting for our working groups to facilitate community projects, we collaborated with many organizations to host community baby showers, farmers markets, Community Health Worker trainings, distribute PPE when needed, etc. To say the Health Equity is not of upmost importance is to let our residents who need access to these services most fall further into the oblivion.

This nationally recognized model engages and continuously convenes a wide array of stakeholders, including residents with lived experience of social, racial, financial, environmental and health inequities, to drive its interventions. Recognizing that meaningful community change starts with building trust and providing immediate support, **HEZ Community Health Workers (CHWs) have served over 253,964 Rhode Islanders.**

Rhode Island's 15 HEZs gained praise nationally in assisting historically underrepresented communities during the COVID-19 pandemic and developed a proven framework for responding effectively to future community emergencies. As Rhode Island does not have local health departments, the HEZ infrastructure helped the state to respond effectively to the immediate needs created by the COVID-19 pandemic by **distributing over 4 million masks, half a million meals, and 328,115 self-testing kits across the state.** HEZ provided continuously updated health information **to over half a million Rhode Islanders to assist them in protecting themselves and their communities!**

The HEZ collaboratives create a local public health infrastructure that is otherwise lacking in our communities:

- At the community level, HEZ's allow speedy mobilization and are reshaping community trust in healthcare systems and the culture around community health. We uplift community voice to derive creative solutions from those closest to the problem. Community leadership *is* equity!
- At the state level, HEZ's reduce redundancies, helping both the state and local communicates maximize their impact.

If HEZ's are not prioritized for funding, gaps will be felt:

- **Gap in Local Information useful to State Entities/Programs:** Health Equity Zones work with multiple state entities to provide nuanced communication strategies and programing. HEZs provide technical assistance to state departments and programs regarding outreach, program adjustments, and multilingual staff needs to be most effective.

- **Gap in Communication:** Health Equity Zones are a Hub of Information. Without that local Hub there would be miscommunication and more work required by both local entities and state departments to build partnerships and synergy.
- **Gap in Streamlined Systems:** Health Equity Zones provide coordination and connection across programs to avoid duplication and drive coordinated change. This work is connected to the state so resources can be aligned with local need.

Health Equity Zones provide technical assistance to local programs that support their effectiveness, capacity, and ability to receive state and federal funds in the future.

The HEZ is an integral part of our community's ability to support our most vulnerable residents, and ultimately create healthy, equitable communities. It is vital that the HEZ initiative is adequately funded to ensure sustainable continuation of their critical work.

Sincerely,

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