

Testimony in Support of H5657

An Act Relating to Insurance—Health Care Accessibility and Quality Assurance Act

Introduced By: Representatives Tanzi, Speakman, Cortvriend, Morales, Cotter, Batista, Kislak, Shanley, McGaw, and Boylan

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My name is Gemma Gorham and I am the Program Manager for the Washington County Health Equity Zone (HEZ) Collaborative, also known as '*Healthy Bodies, Healthy Minds*'. I have over 40 years of public health work experience and am writing to express strong support for H5657: An Act Relating to Insurance-Health Care Accessibility and Quality Assurance Act.

Rhode Island's HEZ initiative is a **health equity**-centered approach to prevention work that leverages **place-based, community-led** solutions to address the underlying **social determinants of health** (SDoH) such as limited access to health care treatment and prevention services, housing, transportation, healthful food, etc. Through a braided funding model, Rhode Island has invested more than \$30 million in public health funding towards Health Equity Zones to develop sustainable infrastructure and support community-identified needs in order to positively impact the socioeconomic and environmental conditions driving disparities and improve health outcomes.

The United States, Rhode Island, and Washington County are all battling an extremely serious mental health and substance abuse crises evidenced by unacceptably high rates of suicide, opioid overdose deaths and a dramatic increase in mental health and substance abuse-related emergency department admissions. Since its inception, the Washington County HEZ Collaborative has focused on addressing some of these issues by implementing a variety of interventions (Zero Suicide, Crisis Intervention Training for police officers and other first responders, Youth and Adult Mental Health First Aid Training, etc.) to improve the quality of care patients receive. However, some of the major barriers that still need to be addressed are inadequate insurance reimbursement rates, high out-of-pocket costs and a serious lack of trained, behavioral health care providers partially due to the fact that they are both underpaid and undervalued.

H567 will address these issues by increasing insurer reimbursement rates for behavioral health care providers, which will help Rhode Island attract and retain more behavioral health providers thereby ameliorating staff shortages, increasing access to outpatient services and decreasing utilization of emergency departments for behavioral health issues.

It is our belief that passage of this bill will not only help facilitate some of these changes, but could also lead the way to other important system changes and reforms that need to occur.

What follows are two, lived experience testimonies from members of our HEZ Collaborative that help exemplify the severity of the current behavioral health care crisis in Rhode Island.

Respectfully submitted,

Gemma Gorham, MPH

Lived Experience of Collaborative Members

"My adult son was 'certified' (held against his will in the Emergency Room due to the severity of his mental health crisis) and then spent 10 days strapped to a gurney, during which time he received no behavioral health care services, was heavily drugged, verbally and sometimes physically abused, and, at the end of the 10 days, released without receiving any mental health or substance abuse treatment because there were no behavioral health counselors in the ER and no in-patient psychiatric beds in Rhode Island. He left the hospital more traumatized than when he was admitted and instantly relapsed and overdosed once again. We had to send him out-of-state for in-patient mental health and substance abuse treatment, which cost tens of thousands of dollars. When he returned to Rhode Island, he was unable to get an appointment with a behavioral health counselor in a timely fashion because there was a 2-3 month wait period. One of the problems is the fact that the professionals who provide these critical, life-saving services are not adequately reimbursed or valued. This bill is an important first step in addressing this problem. By increasing reimbursement rates for mental health providers and increasing access to outpatient treatment, we will hopefully see a decrease in the utilization of emergency rooms for behavioral health services and an increase in the number of patients who receive the evidence-based care they so desperately need.

*Gemma Gorham, Program Manager
Washington County HEZ*

"I personally have witnessed the frustration of long wait times for appointments for needed professional services, for my daughter who suffered from anxiety and depression last spring and summer. These professionals provide critical services in a time of desperate need, and yet are not properly valued or compensated by health insurers. We need to strengthen our network and availability of these important providers in Rhode Island, and I encourage you to support this bill".

*Michelle Girasole
Chair, HBHM Policy Subcommittee*