



Meeting Street

Testimony Re: House Bill (H-7225) – Article 9

February 27, 2024

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Mr. Chairman and members of the Finance Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today.

Meeting Street strongly supports the passage of Article 9 of House Bill 7225 for Social and Human Services Programs. While we support the Governor’s proposal to increase funding for Early Intervention at 100% of the OHIC recommended increase, we believe more is needed. As you know, due to a staffing crisis, since 2021 Early Intervention has been attempting to serve the over **1,000** children on the EI waitlist. EI is a federal and state mandated entitlement service for all children under the age of three. There should never be a wait for children to enter the program and receive needed services and there wasn’t prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and the staffing challenges that resulted.

In 2022, EI asked for a 70% increase in rates so they could offer comparable wages for staff and begin to fully cover the program’s costs. While we were grateful for the 45% increase approved by the General Assembly, we needed more and that is why we are back here today – 2 years later. While the ARPA funding was helpful, it was temporary. We do not believe that the Governor’s proposed budget increase is sufficient to eliminate the waiting lists and disruptions/delays in the delivery of EI services due to noncompetitive wages and inadequate staffing. We are requesting that the General Assembly consider a larger rate increase of 25% and a statutory annual Cost of Living Adjustment (COLA). In addition to putting the EI system on solid footing, this investment will also save money for Rhode Island and our local school districts by reducing the need for additional support services after the age of 3.

Investing in funding for EI is imperative both for Rhode Island’s early childhood system and our public school system. The earlier we can work with children, the greater the positive impact it will have on their development.

Meeting Street strongly urges your support House Bill 7225 – Article 9. Thank you for the opportunity to testify.

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