

To the Members of the House Finance Committee,

My name is Ashley Zechello. I live in Providence, RI, and I am a member of the Women's Fund of Rhode Island Policy and Advocacy Committee.

I support increasing the FY25 budget proposals for both Early Intervention and First Connections. We are thankful for the Early Intervention rate increase proposed by the Governor, but we do not believe it will be sufficient to eliminate waiting lists. Additional funds will have a positive impact on retaining and attracting qualified staff to provide necessary services to programs. These employees play a critical role in supporting Rhode Island's children and their families. However, it is essential to question: how is Rhode Island supporting them?

It is fundamental to increase additional funding allocated through this bill directly supporting Early Intervention employees and their families. Additional funds will assist in prioritizing worker well-being and aiding in retention efforts. Moreover, these funds will serve to attract more individuals to pursue this important career path.

Despite the invaluable service they provide, Early Intervention workers are paid well below market rates. Moreover, the educational requirements for many Early Intervention positions, such as occupational therapists, physical therapists, and speech-language pathologists, necessitate a master's degree. Unfortunately, Americans with graduate degrees often face significant student debt burdens, averaging around \$71,000.

Given these financial challenges, many Early Intervention professionals struggle to repay their student loans in a timely manner, posing a barrier to sustaining themselves and their families. This financial burden may even deter potential candidates from entering the field altogether.

Addressing these challenges requires concerted efforts to support Early Intervention workers. Enhancing worker support not only aids in retention but also helps attract new talent to the field. Increased staffing levels are vital for the success of Early Intervention programs and are essential in reducing waiting lists for services, ensuring timely and effective support for children and families.

It is imperative that we support the employees who support Rhode Island's children and their parents.

I urge you to increase the FY25 budget proposals.

Thank you,

Ashley Zechello

Providence, RI