

JOCELYN P. ANTONIO, MPH

**House Committee on Finance
State of Rhode Island General Assembly**

February 28, 2024

Dear Chairman Abney and members of the House Committee on Finance,

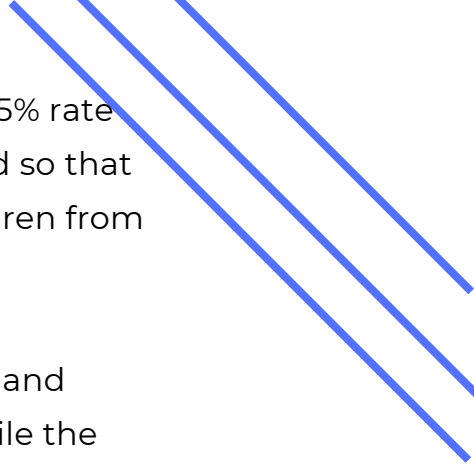
My name is Jocelyn Antonio, and I am the Director of Program Implementation and Policy at Hassenfeld Child Health Innovation Institute at Brown University School of Public Health. I am providing this testimony in my individual capacity.

I write to you all today asking for your support for Governor McKee's proposed fiscal year 2025 Budget Bill H-7225, Article 9, Section 5. The proposed changes are critical investments for early childhood programs, specifically Early Intervention (EI) and First Connections. The proposed Medicaid rate increases would allow these two social and human service programs to be fully staffed and would end waiting lists for infants and toddlers.

A child's brain develops more from birth to 5 years of age than at any other time in life. The development that occurs during these first 5 crucial years of life has a lasting impact on a child's ability to learn and succeed in future endeavors. Simply put, we only get one chance to provide the best support we can to ensure that Rhode Island's young children can succeed.

The support that children need is in part delivered by their families. The well-being of parents is crucial. It is well known that maternal depression influences the developmental, behavioral, and mental health challenges that children may experience. The community environment can impact a child's social competence, temperament, internalized behavior, and aggression.

For these reasons, programs like EI and First Connections are vital to families and young children in Rhode Island. Families and children cannot continue to endure long waiting lists, delayed evaluations, and service disruptions. Children referred to EI cannot be left without the support that they so desperately need and deserve.



The Governor's proposed rate increase is an important start, but a 25% rate increase with an annual Cost of Living Adjustment (COLA) is needed so that we may reduce and eliminate waiting lists that prevent young children from receiving essential services.

First Connections provides vital home visiting services to newborns and their families, offering crucial support during a vulnerable time. While the Governor's proposed rate increase is appreciated, it only covers 33% of the recommended amount. This essentially means that a rate cut come July 2024 could jeopardize the program's very existence.

These programs are not luxuries; they are lifelines. They help children reach their full potential, strengthen families, and contribute to a brighter future for Rhode Island.

It is simply unacceptable for families and young children to not receive needed support due to simply aging out of a list.

I urge you to act boldly. Invest in Early Intervention and First Connections. Choose to give our children the best start in life.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Jocelyn Antonio, MPH

