



Memo To: House Finance Committee

From: Angela McCalla, Policy and Advocacy Program Director, Women's Fund of Rhode Island

Date: Feb 27, 2024

Concerns: **SUPPORTS H-7225 Article 9, Section 5**

Women's Fund of Rhode Island (WFRI) is a nonprofit organization whose mission is to invest in women and girls through advocacy, research and strategic partnerships designed to achieve gender equity through systemic change. We are writing to express our strong support **to help address critical funding for Early Interventions.**

Women make up 51% of the RI workforce, yet nearly 6 in 10 workers earning the minimum wage are women. A typical minimum-wage worker is a woman over 35 with some college, working full time, and likely to be a parent. Women make up the vast majority of the workforce in the caregiving and childcare industries, yet, for the most part, jobs in these sectors do not pay family-sustaining wages.

The early care and education workforce in Rhode Island is nearly 100% female; approximately 40% of whom are women of color. Despite the exponential benefits their work provides to society and the economy, decades of underinvestment led the child care industry to the brink of collapse even before COVID-19 struck. The pandemic has simply provided the final push. Child care providers all over the state are experiencing the strain of being understaffed.

Early interventions are services that are available to babies and young children with developmental delays and disabilities and their families. Accessing services early can have a significant impact on a child's ability to learn new skills and overcome challenges and can increase success in school and life. Since 2019, the number of infants and toddlers receiving Early Intervention (EI) services has dropped 19%. This is largely due to the inability for these agencies to compete in other job sectors.

While we applaud the Governor for ensuring an increase to funding for Early Interventions is had, it still does not address the need to increase wage funding in order to increase staffing accessibility and retention. Without this mechanism, families will continue to be on waitlists because there is no one to support them. This also results in less quality care. We ask this committee to add The General Assembly should consider larger rate increases (25%) and a statutory annual Cost of Living Adjustment (COLA) for Early Intervention to meet the requirements of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act that make a lifetime difference in children's success and saves money in the long run.

Getting women back to work requires building the care infrastructure that we have always needed. Investments in Rhode Island's childcare system are critical to "building back better." We urge you to show your support with this critical need.