

April 1, 2025

Chair Abney and Members of the House Committee on Finance:

I am a faculty member in the RI College School of Social Work, testifying in strong support of H 6098, legislation that offers loan relief for social workers entering public service.

I want to thank Representative Shallcross Smith and her cosponsors for this legislation and for all of her significant and thoughtful legislation to address the behavioral health crisis in this state. The legislation addresses two important current problems for Rhode Islanders: rising student debt and a shortage of mental health professionals to serve those in need.

I have been a social worker and social work educator for decades and can attest to its many rewards as a career. However, money is often not one of them. Students considering social work as a career are dissuaded by its lower salaries; many students are concerned about accruing debt that their future salaries won't easily allow them to pay back. And while social workers need a master's degree to engage in clinical practice, the jobs they receive, especially as new graduates, makes two additional years of student debt difficult to incur. Starting salaries, often below those of others with graduate degrees, make them think twice about additional debt. This is particularly true for students of color and first-generation college students, populations we greatly need as social workers.

It is difficult for many students to finance their education. I have food in my office so students can eat, as many of them are experiencing serious poverty while in school. Some stop attending RIC or attend part time to make the additional money needed to pay for their education. Knowing they would have less debt when they graduate and enter the workplace would be a game changer. It would not only serve as an enticement for people to pursue social work as a career, but it would also allow our students to finish faster and be more focused on their education.

This legislation makes great sense. It allows students to pursue their passion and serve their communities without the fear of financial insecurity; it provides the state with an increased and diverse workforce to serve the significant behavioral health needs of our population. I urge you to pass it.

Sincerely,
Wendy Becker, PhD, LICSW