

JOCELYN P. ANTONIO, MPH

Testimony on H-5197, Removing Child Support Enforcement from Child Care Assistance Program House Finance Committee May 22, 2025

Good afternoon, Chairperson Abney and members of the House Finance Committee. My name is **Jocelyn Antonio**. I am a resident of the town of Cumberland. I am providing this testimony in my personal capacity as a public health professional.

I strongly urge your **support** for **H-5197 – An Act Relating to Human Services – The Rhode Island Works Program**, sponsored by Representative Diaz and co-sponsored by Representatives Shallcross Smith, Caldwell, Craven, Cruz, Slater, Edwards, Casimiro, Donovan, and McNamara.

This legislation would **remove the requirement** that families must participate in **child and medical support orders** to receive childcare assistance. This proposal is a **vital step** in ensuring that childcare assistance is more accessible to families across Rhode Island, particularly for low-income families, mixed-status families, LGBTQ+ parents and survivors of domestic violence.

Addressing Barriers to Child Care Access

Currently, Rhode Island **mandates that families seeking childcare assistance comply with paternity establishment and child support enforcement protocols**. While these policies aim to ensure parental responsibility, they **inadvertently create unnecessary and harmful barriers** for families who simply need childcare to return to work and support their families.

- Some parents may **avoid seeking assistance out of fear, stigma, or concerns** for their safety, forcing them to choose between **economic stability and accessing childcare**.
- These requirements can **negatively impact young children**, creating instability in their caregiving environments. Research shows that **early relationships and social environment are crucial brain development, emotional well-being, and long-term health outcomes**.¹

H-5197 **removes these burdens**, ensuring that families **receive the support they need without unnecessary interference**, while allowing children to thrive in stable, high-quality childcare settings.

Public Health Implications

According to the **American Public Health Association**, **education access and quality is a social determinate of health** - a non-medical factor that significantly impacts **health outcomes**. Educational attainment is the **single greatest predictor of a person's health and well-being across the life span**.²

Quality **early childcare** plays a **critical role in health and development**, supporting **learning, behavior, and social-emotional skills** while improve **long-term mental and physical health**. Studies

¹ Tam, "Hurting Families That Need It Most"; Schneider and Gibbs, "Disparities in Housing, Health Care, Child Care, and Economic Security Affect Babies for Life."

² CDC, "Social Determinants of Health"; American Public Health Association, "Education and Health."

have also shown that **high-quality, affordable childcare** improves outcomes in **education, economic mobility, and health outcomes**.³

For parents, **reliable childcare reduces stress, improves job stability and mobility, enhances financial security, and enables them to provide a healthier, and more stable home environment**.⁴ Investing in childcare assistance not only benefits **individual families** but also **strengthens Rhode Island's economy** by ensuring that more parents can **fully participate in the workforce**.⁵

When families **face obstacles to childcare**, children are more likely to experience **unstable caregiving arrangements, parental stress, and economic insecurity**—all of which have well-documented negative effects on **child health, school readiness, and development**.⁶ These gaps create **opportunity disparities that K-12 schools often struggle to address later in a child's education**, underscoring the **importance of early intervention through accessible childcare**.⁷

By **eliminating punitive barriers**, H-5197 **supports both child and family well-being**, ensuring that Rhode Island's **most vulnerable families** are not excluded from the assistance they need.

Protecting Mixed-Status and Immigrant Families

Current child support enforcement requirements disproportionately harm **mixed-status and immigrant families**, many of whom **fear engaging with government agencies** due to **immigration concerns or language barriers**.

- Some parents **avoid applying for childcare assistance altogether**, worried about how their **immigration status or lack of formal documentation** could impact their case.
- **Recent federal immigration policies have exacerbated fear** among **Latino and mixed-status populations**, further discouraging families from seeking essential support services.⁸

By **removing these restrictive conditions**, H-5197 helps ensure that all **Rhode Island children, regardless of their family's immigration status, have access to the care and early education opportunities they deserve**.

Ensuring Equity for LGBTQ+ Families

LGBTQ+ parents also face **unique challenges** under the current system. **Non-traditional family structures, legal barriers to parental recognition, and discrimination in paternity establishment processes** can make it **difficult for LGBTQ+ families to comply with child support enforcement requirements**.

³ Schneider and Gibbs, “Disparities in Housing, Health Care, Child Care, and Economic Security Affect Babies for Life.”

⁴ Birchfield Kennedy, JD, “Child Care and Early Education Is a Social Determinant of Health—For Children and Adults.”

⁵ Lieberman, “Lack of Access to Child Care Impacts Child Well-Being.”

⁶ Schneider and Gibbs, “Disparities in Housing, Health Care, Child Care, and Economic Security Affect Babies for Life”; Malik, “Growing the Economy Through Affordable Child Care”; Birchfield Kennedy, JD, “Child Care and Early Education Is a Social Determinant of Health—For Children and Adults”; Foundation, “The Impact of the High Cost of Child Care.”

⁷ Schneider and Gibbs, “Disparities in Housing, Health Care, Child Care, and Economic Security Affect Babies for Life.”

⁸ Campos, “‘People Are Scared’”; Ferré-Sadurní and Heisler, “An Immigrant Neighborhood Where Trump Made Inroads Now Fears ICE Raids”; Williams, “‘Not an Option for Me’: Fear, Uncertainty as Immigrants in RI Face Deportation Threat.”

- **Same-sex parents** may face **legal hurdles** in establishing both parents' rights, particularly when only one parent is biologically related to the child.
- **Non-biological parents** in LGBTQ+ families may be forced to **navigate complex legal processes** to qualify for assistance.
- **Trans and gender-nonconforming parents** may face discrimination or invasive disclosure requirement, potentially leading to **stigmatization or denial of benefits**.

With **growing political attacks on LGBTQ+ rights**, many families **face increasing uncertainty about legal protections**.⁹ By removing outdated and exclusionary requirements, **H-5197 ensures that LGBTQ+ families have equal access to childcare assistance without unnecessary legal or bureaucratic hurdles**.

Protecting Survivors of Domestic Violence

The existing cooperation requirement can pose significant risks for survivors of domestic violence, who may fear that establishing paternity or pursuing child support could lead to further harm. Removing this requirement aligns with trauma-informed approaches to public health by prioritizing the safety and autonomy of survivors, reducing the risk of re-traumatization, and promoting access to essential services.

Conclusion

House Bill 5197 is an **essential and long overdue reform** that prioritizes the **well-being of Rhode Island's children** while addressing **systemic barriers that disproportionately harm low-income families, mixed-status families, and LGBTQ+ parents**.

By removing unnecessary child support enforcement requirements, this legislation:

- **Expands access to childcare for families in need**
- **Reduces disparities in maternal and child health outcomes**
- **Supports workforce participation and economic stability**
- **Advances equity for immigrant and LGBTQ+ families**

I **strongly urge the committee** to support H-5197 and help build a **stronger, healthier, and more equitable Rhode Island**.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

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⁹ Rush, "Trump Policies on Gender-Affirming Care and Passports for Transgender People Challenged in Court – WPRI.Com"; Boardman, "Trump Executive Orders Could Have Big Impact on Local LGBTQ Community."

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