

The Honorable Marvin L. Abney
Chair, House Finance Committee
Rhode Island State House, 82 Smith Street, Providence, Rhode Island 02903

RE: Amend H 7127 – Department of Health FY2027 Budget

March 24, 2026

Dear Chairman Abney and Members of the House Finance Committee,

As the **Steering Committee of the Washington County Health Equity Zone (HEZ)**, we represent a collaborative of organizations deeply engaged in the work of the HEZ and its efforts in advancing community health. We write today in **opposition** to the proposed Rhode Island Department of Health budget (**H 7127**) as currently written and urge the inclusion of restoration of **full funding (\$2.1 million) for all 14 HEZs**. The HEZ initiative is a **nationally recognized community-driven model** that has strengthened the health and resilience of Rhode Island communities for over a decade. The proposed budget **fails to support this critical public health infrastructure**, jeopardizing essential programs and partnerships that directly improve the lives of residents across the state.

HEZs Deliver Measurable Impact

A modest \$2.1 million annual investment yields significant, long-term, results-driven benefits, including:

- **Lower healthcare costs:** The average per-person public insurance costs is significantly lower in HEZ communities.
- **Reduced chronic disease:** HEZ communities show lower chronic disease rates than expected given their social vulnerability, with high cholesterol and heart disease declining faster than the state average.
- **Increased community resilience:** From 2018 to 2022, social vulnerability in HEZ dropped by 21%, improving the ability to withstand and recover from crises.
- **A respected, nationally recognized model:** RI's HEZ network is nationally recognized as a leader in health equity, affirming our efforts and demonstrating the state's commitment to supporting communities and giving residents a voice in shaping their health outcomes. This recognition is crucial for securing sustained support and attracting additional investments to further strengthen the health of **all** RI residents.

Washington County HEZ: Addressing Urgent Needs

We've seen firsthand how the HEZ model strengthens communities and improves lives. Because of this, the Washington County HEZ is deeply **embedded in the strategic plans** of our many partner organizations. The loss of HEZ funding would have detrimental effects on critical initiatives that support our community and the meaningful progress we've made together, including:

- **Reducing Criminal Justice Involvement:** Through our Crisis Intervention Team (CIT) training for law enforcement officers, we have successfully diverted 529 individuals from arrest in 2019 alone, which reduces incarceration costs while ensuring the behavioral health support needed for individuals.

- **Behavioral Health & Suicide Prevention:** Washington County had the highest suicide rates in Rhode Island, with a **20% increase from 2013 to 2015**. To address this crisis, we implemented a **county-wide, comprehensive prevention approach**, including:
 - Training over 1,000 police officers, parents, teachers, and community members in Mental Health First Aid.
 - Securing federal funding to support our hospitals and community health centers to screen 125,000 patients for depression and suicide risk through the Zero Suicide initiative.
 - Embedding Community Health Workers in emergency departments, leading to 44 fewer emergency visits for seven high-utilizing individuals and 649 interventions for 277 individuals.

Critical Need: A behavioral health triage system for Washington County & housing support

As a community, we have identified two urgent priorities currently being worked on by our large network of partners and residents: 1. A behavioral health triage center to divert individuals from overcrowded emergency rooms. 2. Affordable housing solutions, supported by a HUD PRO Housing grant that relies on HEZ infrastructure for community-wide implementation.

Without the funding for HEZ infrastructure, no single organization has the capacity to lead these initiatives. **HEZs are uniquely positioned** to facilitate cross-sector collaboration and shared decision-making and without this infrastructure, critical initiatives like this cannot move forward.

Investing in HEZ is an Investment in Rhode Island’s Future

The HEZ network is an integral part of our state’s ability to create **strong, thriving communities**. Without adequate funding, Rhode Island risks undoing years of progress and innovation that will have a significant impact on the health and well-being of **all** Rhode Islanders.

We urge the Committee to **restore full funding to the HEZ initiative** in the FY2027 budget to ensure that these vital efforts continue.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Washington County Health Equity Zone (Healthy Bodies Healthy Minds) Steering Committee:

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