

Rhode Island House of Representatives
Chairman Marvin Abney
House Finance Committee
State House
Providence, Rhode Island

RE: Support for Restoring Funding – Department of Health Tuberculosis (TB) Clinic

Chair Abney and Members of the Committee:

My name is Dr. Silvia Chiang. I am an Associate Professor at the Alpert Medical School of Brown University and a pediatric infectious disease physician at Hasbro Children's. At the Rhode Island Department of Health ("RISE") Tuberculosis (TB) Clinic, I diagnose and treat children and adolescents. I have conducted pediatric TB research for 14 years in several different countries and have written both national and international clinical guidelines, based, in part, by my clinical experiences in Rhode Island. I am writing to urge the Committee to restore funding for the TB Clinic.

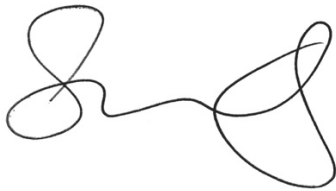
Today, March 24th, is World TB Day, commemorated each year to raise awareness about this devastating disease, which sickens over 10 million people - 1 million of whom are children - every year. Even though we have effective treatments for TB, more people die from TB than from any other single bacteria or virus. How is it possible that a disease that can be cured and even prevented with effective treatments kills nearly 2 million people each year? The main reason is everywhere around the world, including in Rhode Island, TB disproportionately affects people who are poor and have difficulty accessing healthcare services. For this reason, it is widely recognized that TB care must be paid for or subsidized by public funding. At the RISE TB Clinic, my patients' parents frequently ask me how much they need to pay for their clinic visits, chest x-rays, and medicines. They are visibly relieved and complete TB treatment when I tell them that their TB care is paid for by the State of Rhode Island.

Whenever public funding for TB has been cut, the number of people who fall sick and die from TB increases, and drug-resistant forms of TB become more common. Children are impacted even more from these cuts than adults for two reasons. First, pediatric TB can be quite difficult to diagnose, and the specialized knowledge and skills found in TB clinics are essential for proper diagnosis. Second, when it comes to TB, children are the "canaries in the coal mine," meaning that when more TB is spread in the community, children are the first to fall ill. There was a resurgence of TB in the U.S. in the early 1990s, due to the AIDS epidemic and to cuts in public funding for TB. TB cases increased by 19% in people of all ages and by 45% in children.

Similarly, during the COVID-19 pandemic, when public health resources were directed away from TB and towards COVID, TB cases rose by 34% in people of all ages and by 47% in children.

For these reasons, I respectfully urge the Committee to restore funding for the RISE TB Clinic. Without this funding, we will undoubtedly see more children with TB. Moreover, children and adolescents with TB will not be properly diagnosed, suffering long-term complications and perhaps even die from this curable, preventable disease. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a series of loops and curves that form a stylized, cursive representation of the name Silvia S. Chiang.

Silvia S. Chiang, MD, ScM
Associate Professor of Pediatrics
Alpert Medical School of Brown University

Attending Physician, Pediatric Infectious Diseases
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The RISE TB Clinic