

Dear members of the finance committee,

My name is Andrea Gonzalez. I am a Program Manager at Young Voices, and I work at the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline supporting people that struggle with mental health concerns and substance use crises. I am writing in support of bills H8317, H8178, and H8145, all of which would ensure that we have more funding and access to proper public transportation.

Every community I serve depends heavily on RIPTA. From the youth who travel daily to go to school or to our afterschool programs, to the people who seek mental health and substance use support and do not have cars or reliable transportation. I am already seeing the detrimental effects of the cuts that have been happening for the past few years. Today, many more young people would be joining me, but they can't miss the last bus of the night, which now comes at 5:30pm. I have noticed youth having to consistently leave afterschool programs earlier and earlier because if they miss their bus, another one won't come. During the freezing temperatures, school absences continued to rise and youth lost access to opportunities. People got sick waiting for buses that never came, and people's only means of transportation became unreliable and unpredictable.

Thousands of people in this little state rely on RIPTA, and too many of them are losing their jobs, health, time, because RIPTA can't serve them the way it used to. I grew up with what we called good old "Uncle RIPTA", which I took to school, my job, my internships, and any volunteering opportunities. I remember being able to get from Broad St, to KP, to East Providence in less than 1 hour. That waiting outside for the bus wasn't a big deal because "The R Line comes every few minutes" I miss knowing that the youth would be fine at KP because in 10 more minutes another bus would come and drop them off home safely. Now, I worry that every time we finish our program, that youth might be stuck at KP for hours, or will have to spend the little money they have on Ubers. We need to do better for the people of Rhode Island. RIPTA deserves funding, and our people deserve the freedom of public transportation.

I am urging you to pass bills H8317, H8178, and H8145, and SAVE RIPTA now.

Thank you,

Andrea Gonzalez