

February 25, 2026

Dear Members of the House Finance Committee,

I am writing to express my strong support for legislation that would establish sustainable, ongoing funding for the Rhode Island Auditory Oral Program (RIAOP).

My connection to hearing loss is deeply personal. My niece is deaf, and our family has experienced firsthand both the challenges and the possibilities that come with hearing loss. Navigating communication, education, and access to appropriate services can be overwhelming without the right support systems in place.

Through our experience with the Rhode Island Auditory Oral Program, we have seen the life-changing impact of specialized education and services. RIAOP provides children who are deaf or hard of hearing with the tools they need to develop spoken language, build confidence, and fully participate in their schools and communities. The educators and specialists in this program are not only highly skilled, but deeply committed to each child's success.

Our personal experience has made it clear that programs like RIAOP are not optional—they are essential. Without it, families like ours would be left searching for services that may not exist elsewhere in the state or would require significant disruption to a child's education and development.

This legislation is critical not only for individual families, but for Rhode Island as a whole. It ensures that children who are deaf or hard of hearing have equitable access to the education and support they need to thrive. Every child deserves the opportunity to reach their full potential, regardless of hearing ability.

Equally important is the need for stable, consistent funding from year to year. The current uncertainty creates unnecessary stress for families and school districts, making it difficult to plan for student placement and continuity of services. Children benefit from stability, and programs like RIAOP need reliable funding to continue providing high-quality support without interruption.

Establishing a funding model similar to that of the Rhode Island School for the Deaf is a matter of equity. Students with hearing loss deserve access to a full range of educational options that meet their individual needs, and RIAOP is a critical part of that continuum of services.

I respectfully urge you to support this legislation and help ensure that the Rhode Island Auditory Oral Program can continue its vital work for years to come. This is an investment in children, families, and the future of our state.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,
Claribel Crews, M.Ed
Warwick

