

Donna A Rizzo, MS CCC, LLC
Auditory Oral Speech Language Pathologist
7 Austin Avenue
Greenville, RI 02828
401.447.9246

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Dear Finance Committee Chair, Representative Marvin Abney and members of the House Finance Committee:

My name is Donna Rizzo and I am an Auditory Oral Speech Language Pathologist working with Deaf and Hard of Hearing children and their families in the state of Rhode Island. I am writing this letter in support of H7011 - Making an Appropriation to the RI Auditory Oral Program (RI AOP). This one-of-a-kind program offers families in the state of RI a listening and spoken language option for their children who are born Deaf or Hard of Hearing. The program focuses on learning how to use cochlear implant and hearing aid technology that affords these children the ability to hear and understand spoken language. An education at the RI Auditory Oral Program is different from an education at RI School for the Deaf - which focuses on visual sign language development as opposed to auditory development. Both programs need to exist for families to have options. The mission of the RI AOP is to prepare children for return to their home school districts so they can continue their education in mainstream, inclusion settings.

This program opened in 2005 following years of research by a Deaf Task Force through the RI Department of Education. I was fortunate to be a part of the planning and development of the RI Auditory Oral Program and can attest firsthand to the immense success of the auditory oral approach to education for children who use cochlear implants and hearing aids. Of primary importance is the value and commitment of these children and their families to support use of technology and spoken language development. Listening and spoken language learning can only happen at this program if that is what a family chooses for their child.

In my private practice, I work closely with Early Intervention. I help families of infants identified with severe to profound Deafness to make choices regarding technology and language development. Ninety percent of children who are born Deaf or Hard of Hearing are born to hearing parents and families. Many families pursue cochlear implantation to give their children the opportunity to hear and develop spoken language. I work hard with these families from birth to three to make this happen. When the children turn 3, these same families need a listening and spoken language educational option and the RI Auditory Oral Program is the only one in this state to provide that.

I appreciate that the finance committee is considering appropriations in the budget to support the continued existence of this vital program. Please pass this bill for the success of our Deaf or Hard of Hearing children.

Respectfully

Donna Rizzo, MS CCC, LLC
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