



April 28, 2026

**The Honorable Marvin L. Abney, Chair**  
**House Finance Committee**  
**Rhode Island Statehouse**  
**Providence, RI 02903**

**RE: TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HOUSE BILL H7317 — RHODE ISLAND EARLY EDUCATOR  
WORKFORCE ACT**

Chair Abney and Members of the House Finance Committee:

On behalf of United Way of Rhode Island, we express our strong support for House Bill H7317, the **Rhode Island Early Educator Workforce Act**. This bill would direct the Department of Human Services and the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education to work collaboratively to manage key early educator workforce strategies, including the **T.E.A.C.H. early childhood scholarship program, registered apprenticeships for early educators**, and at least **\$1 million annually** to continue the **Child Care WAGES program** to improve compensation, education, and retention for early educators working in licensed programs statewide.

United Way's policy and advocacy work is guided by our strategic framework: **Strong Families, Strong Nonprofits, Strong United Way**. We prioritize policies that strengthen household stability, expand access to opportunity, and ensure public systems deliver measurable value. This includes centering **ALICE households** — families who are working and still priced out of stability by the high cost of basics. Through our 211 system, we regularly hear from families for whom childcare instability is both an economic and educational barrier. When the early educator workforce is underpaid and unstable, children, parents, and employers all feel the consequences.

The bill's findings note that Rhode Island early educators are often paid very low wages despite having credentials and demonstrating effective practice; a 2019 statewide survey found that more than **40% of infant/toddler educators worried about having enough food** for their families, **50% worried about paying for housing**, nearly **one-third had a second job**, and almost **two-thirds planned to leave** the field if compensation did not improve. The bill also notes that, according to 2024 labor data, the average wage for a childcare teacher in Rhode Island was just **\$16.74 per hour**, while the state minimum wage is scheduled to reach **\$17.00 per hour in January 2027**. The gap between these wages is just \$0.26 per hour—roughly \$10 a week for a full-time worker—yet even that small difference can mean being able to put a full meal on the table for a family.

That reality is inconsistent with what research tells us about early childhood education. The National Academies has found that educators of young children need knowledge and competencies comparable to those of teachers of older children, and that the educational qualifications and compensation of early educators should be aligned accordingly. H7317



responds directly to that challenge by supporting credentials, apprenticeships, and wage supplements that can help recruit and retain the workforce Rhode Island's children and families need.

United Way of Rhode Island respectfully urges your support for House Bill H7317. This bill is a practical investment in child development, family stability, and Rhode Island's future workforce.

Sincerely,

**Elijah McLean**  
**Manager, Government Relations & Policy**  
**United Way of Rhode Island**