



**Testimony Re: House Bill 7501 Related to Building Opportunities for Out-of-School Time**

**House Finance Committee**

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Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today. Rhode Island KIDS COUNT would like to voice our strong support for House Bill 7501 and thank Representative Shallcross Smith for sponsoring this bill and Representatives Fogarty, Slater, Bennett, Azzinaro, and DeSimone for co-sponsoring. This act would allocate \$100,000 in the FY 2026–2027 budget to support the mental health and emotional well-being of children and youth by investing in out-of-school time (OST) programs, which serve as critical community spaces and foster connection, stability, and resilience.

High-quality, organized afterschool, summer, and out-of-school time programs improve the supervision and safety of youth, promote positive social skills, improve attendance and behavior, and, with sufficient dosage, improve student achievement. Quality out-of-school time programs provide engaging activities that are intentionally designed to promote youth development and are taught by trained, dedicated instructors who work effectively with youth. Youth who participate consistently can show improved competence, caring, and connections. **School hours only cover 20% of the time children and youth have available for learning, forming friendships, developing, and practicing skills, and exploring interests. What children do during out-of-school time matters for success in school and life.**

Rhode Island is facing a youth mental health crisis. In 2022–2023, nearly **one in three children ages 3 to 17 (30%)** in our state had a mental, emotional, or behavioral health problem. At the same time, **more than half of children who needed mental health care had difficulty accessing it.** These gaps leave too many young people without the support they need until they reach a crisis point.

In 2023 alone, there were **3,074 emergency department visits and 1,962 hospitalizations** of Rhode Island children with a primary diagnosis of a mental disorder. Among youth ages 13 to 19, there were **2,387 emergency visits and 1,305 hospitalizations related to suicide attempts or self-harm between 2019 and 2023.** These are not just numbers, they represent young people in our communities who need earlier, more accessible support.

House Bill 7501 is a necessary investment because it focuses on prevention and community-based care through OST program providers. These programs are especially critical at a time when our mental health system remains reliant on crisis driven care with inadequate investment in prevention.

We also know that disparities persist. Children living in poverty are **two to three times more likely** to experience mental health conditions, and Youth of Color and LGBTQ+ youth face additional barriers to accessing care. OST programs, which are deeply rooted in communities and often reflect the cultures and experiences of the families they serve, are positioned to reach these young people in ways traditional systems often cannot.

This bill represents a modest but meaningful step toward equipping OST providers with the tools and resources necessary to prioritize prevention and early intervention in a community-based setting. By investing in OST providers, Rhode Island can improve outcomes for children and support families across the state.

At a time when youth mental health concerns are rising, investing in OST programs is not just about keeping kids busy, it is about keeping them safe, supported, and prepared for the future.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.