

Emily Bernstein

Organization: Wheelhouse Health Navigation Services, LLC

IN SUPPORT OF BILL #RI H8211 | 2026

(JOINT RESOLUTION MAKING AN APPROPRIATION OF \$10,000,000 TO THE RHODE ISLAND DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH COMMUNITY HEALTH WORKER INITIATIVE)

My name is Emily Bernstein, and I am a Certified Community Health Worker in RI. I started my business, Wheelhouse Health, as a resource for newcomers and immigrants to learn how to access, understand and afford their healthcare. We have employed a team of 6 CHWs to guide refugees and immigrants in getting started in their healthcare journey. While Medicaid reimbursement was still available, we were working with organizations like Dorcas International and Refugee Dream Center to ensure their new arrivals had access to insurance, primary care, dental, medical devices, and more. Now that funding has been cut, we are no longer able to provide these services.

I wanted to share a story about how impactful CHW work can be. Last week, I spoke at Beautiful Day, a workforce development program for refugees, about healthcare navigation. We have developed a curriculum for Healthcare Literacy and presented a portion of this to the members of a women's information group. We reviewed topics such as primary vs. specialty care, the importance of preventive healthcare, how insurance works, how to afford healthcare, when to seek care at different clinics, and more. I was inundated with questions by the group – who spoke Farsi and Pashto and was facilitated by interpreters – and have scheduled several more visits to the organization to continue this education. The women didn't know how to begin the process of taking care of their husbands' chronic disease, how to get their children physicals for school, when to renew their insurance coverage or when they had a chance to change their coverage. They asked dozens of questions about how they could possibly afford the large bills nearly everyone in the room had received for care due to lack of coverage. The directors of Beautiful Day repeatedly expressed gratitude, and said outright that there was nowhere for this population to go in order to get this type of education.

Through funding for CHW work, we could provide regular group classes to teach refugees health literacy and basic, tangible actions they can take to navigate their own healthcare. This would cut down on unnecessary ER visits, improve preventative care adherence, and ensure that more eligible individuals are covered by available insurance policies. All of this is important to the overall effectiveness of healthcare in the state, and is crucial for positive health outcomes.

CHWs are uniquely poised to be able to deliver this type of hands-on training, through their work directly with the populations most affected by health disparities. If this bill is approved, I could continue offering these courses through grant funding by the state. Funding this workforce is

one of the most effective ways we can improve population health, cut down on costs and truly change lives on an every-day basis.

I wholeheartedly support this bill, and with great hope for the future ask that you approve this funding to ensure these life-changing programs can continue in our state.