



May 12, 2026

The Honorable Marvin L. Abney, Chair
House Finance Committee
Rhode Island House
82 Smith Street
Providence, RI 02903

RE: IN SUPPORT OF HOUSE BILL 8211 MAKING AN APPROPRIATION OF \$10,000,000
TO THE RHODE ISLAND DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH COMMUNITY HEALTH
WORKER INITIATIVE

Chair Abney and Honorable Committee Members,

I respectfully submit testimony in support of House Bill 8211.

I am writing in support of the proposed legislation to fund programs that place community health workers in public libraries and other community-based organizations to support community and individual resilience.

As a longtime library employee and current library director, I have seen firsthand the evolving needs that community members bring to the public library. In addition to utilizing traditional library services such as borrowing books, attending book discussions, or participating in children's story times, community members also rely on libraries for internet access, English language classes, and as safe, welcoming third places that are free and accessible to all.

At its foundation, the public library is a place that supports lifelong learning and access to information. Because of this, it is also intuitively a place where people turn when they need help navigating resources and systems.

During my time working at a public service desk, I observed a significant increase in requests for assistance navigating health, legal, and social services. Community members regularly sought help accessing housing assistance, SNAP benefits, legal aid, and mental health services. While librarians are trained to locate, evaluate, and make information accessible, we are not equipped to provide the intensive, ongoing support often required to successfully navigate these complex systems.

Working closely with individuals facing multiple barriers requires a trained and trusted advocate with specialized knowledge of community resources and service systems.

Since 2023, our library has used grant funding to bring on a part-time licensed social worker. Although social workers and community health workers serve different roles, both are extremely valuable in community spaces like libraries. The presence of a trained professional has demonstrated how impactful it can be when community members are able to access support in a familiar, trusted, and non-stigmatizing environment.

A community health worker embedded in a public library could help connect people to critical community resources through referrals, outreach, application assistance, and individualized support. Like library staff, community health workers are frontline workers who build trust and maintain close relationships with the communities they serve. Their presence within libraries and other community-based organizations would strengthen the connection between residents and health and social service systems, facilitate access to care and support, and improve both service delivery and community self-sufficiency.

Public libraries are already serving as hubs for community support. This legislation would provide the infrastructure and staffing necessary to meet these needs more effectively and compassionately.

For these reasons, I respectfully urge favorable consideration of House Bill 8211, as I believe it will deliver meaningful and lasting benefits to families and individuals across Rhode Island.

I appreciate the Committee's thoughtful review and thank you for the opportunity to share my perspective.

Sincerely,

Meredith Bonds-Harmon, Director of Library Services
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