



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

Tuesday, May 12, 2026

RE: House Bill 8490 - An Act Relating To Health And Safety -- The Noreen Drexel Birthing Center Fund

Dear Chairman Abney and Members of the Committee on Finance,

I respectfully write in strong support of H-8490, legislation establishing the Noreen Drexel Birthing Center Fund to support the continued operation and long-term sustainability of birthing services at Newport Hospital.

When Brown Health announced it would continue operating the Noreen Stonor Drexel Birthing Center at Newport Hospital (the “Birthing Center”), our community felt relief. The decision was significant, but the work is still not finished. Long-term stability and funding remain unresolved which is the reason why this legislation is before you today. No community should be subject to the scrambling Newport endured to maintain well-functioning, core components of our healthcare system, like maternity units.

H-8490 provides an important framework for shared responsibility and accountability by pairing state support with contributions from Brown Health and philanthropy while requiring transparency, community engagement, and protections against reductions in services.

As you will hear from various perspectives in our community, the Birthing Center is essential to our community and underpins important parts of this state’s economy and the broader healthcare system. Its potential closure was never theoretical—its closure would have functionally eliminated access to maternal care for many of our families.

Last summer, myself and my colleagues on the Newport City Council were the first public body to engage on this issue, and more than 200 residents showed up and filled Newport City Hall to urge Brown Health to keep the Birthing Center open. Providers, doulas, parents, and community leaders warned that shutting it down would endanger patients, strain our emergency response resources, and threaten the viability of key employers.

The consequences of closing the Birthing Center would be immediate. Expectant mothers would end up in the ER or be diverted off-island requiring hour plus long trips. Ambulances would be tied up transporting laboring patients, stretching our community's limited capacity and delaying responses to other emergencies. As our Fire Chief previously testified, closure of the Birthing Center would mean women delivering in ambulances, Ubers, and emergency rooms. These are not hypothetical scenarios; they are predictable outcomes.

The economic impact is equally serious. Newport is already a difficult place for young families to build a life, and the presence of major employers, like those at Naval Station Newport, are predicated on the presence of the Hospital and its basic services. Reduced access to basic healthcare would push key employers and families away and widen disparities for those without flexible jobs or reliable transportation.

The coalition we've built shows just how deeply Rhode Islanders value maternal care. But this fight also exposes a broader crisis: our healthcare system is at its breaking point, and basic services are being cut. We are past the point of studies and pilot projects. H-8490 represents an important step toward defining maternal healthcare access as an essential public service worthy of long-term investment and accountability.

The Birthing Center was saved because the community acted with urgency and clarity. That isn't going to be enough for similar units in the system. Protecting maternal health and rebuilding the core of our healthcare system: primary care, cannot rest on the backs of nurses, recent and expectant mothers, and overworked doctors.

We, as policymakers, must define them as foundational to our healthcare system and ensure we aren't stuck in an annual fight to make the healthcare system put people over profits. For these reasons, we strongly encourage you to support H-8490.

Thank you for your attention to this matter and your commitment to Rhode Island families.

Sincerely,

Xay Khamsyvoravong
Councilor At-Large, City of Newport
Candidate for Lt. Governor