

Dear Chair Abney and Members of the House Finance Committee,

I respectfully write in strong support of H8490, legislation establishing the Noreen Drexel Birthing Center Fund to support the continued operation and long-term sustainability of birthing services at Newport Hospital.

This bill addresses an urgent and significant healthcare challenge facing Newport County families. **The potential loss of the Newport Hospital birthing center would have serious consequences for pregnant women, infants, healthcare providers, and the broader community.** Access to local maternal healthcare is an essential component of a healthy community and should not be treated as an optional service dependent solely upon short-term financial calculations.

Newport County is geographically isolated from the rest of Rhode Island. For many families, particularly during medical emergencies, severe weather, traffic congestion, or high-risk pregnancies, traveling off-island for labor and delivery care presents real risks and hardships. The continued operation of local birthing services is critical for ensuring timely access to prenatal, labor and delivery, postpartum, and neonatal care close to home.

The Newport Hospital birthing center also serves an important role in supporting community health outcomes. **Local maternity care strengthens continuity of care for mothers and infants, improves healthcare access, and supports the long-term well-being of families throughout the region.** Preserving these services also helps maintain Newport Hospital's role as a full-service community hospital capable of meeting the diverse healthcare needs of residents and visitors alike.

H8490 proposes a thoughtful and collaborative funding model that recognizes the shared responsibility of maintaining essential healthcare infrastructure. The bill calls for a partnership between the State of Rhode Island, Brown Health, and the philanthropic community to stabilize operations while long-term planning and sustainability strategies are developed. This balanced approach ensures that no single entity bears the entire burden while also creating accountability and transparency around future investments and operational planning.

Importantly, this legislation creates an opportunity to move beyond crisis management and toward a long-term vision for maternal and infant healthcare in Newport County. **The goal should not simply be to prevent closure for another year, but to build a modern, sustainable, high-quality birthing program that can continue serving families for generations to come.**

The community response to the potential closure of the birthing center has demonstrated how deeply residents value these services. **Families, healthcare professionals, local leaders, and community organizations have united around the importance of preserving local maternity care. H8490 reflects that shared commitment and provides a practical framework for action.**

I respectfully urge the committee to support H8490 and to recognize the preservation of local birthing services as a critical public health investment for Rhode Island families.

Thank you for your consideration and leadership on this important issue.

Sincerely,

Katherine Carbone

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