



5/14/ 26

Members of the House Finance Committee,

Thank you for taking the time to meet with me today. My name is Ditra Edwards, and I'm here on behalf of SISTA Fire as part of the Raising RI Coalition, a coalition of more than 60 organizations committed to ending deep poverty for Rhode Island children. Together, we are calling for a stronger safety net that meets the real needs of families. I'm writing in strong support of the Rhode Island Works Program **(HB-7689)**.

At SISTA Fire, we spend time listening closely to families across Rhode Island. Through story collection, organizing conversations, and community research, parents have shared what it means to survive rising costs while trying to hold their households together. One mother shared, "I work every day and still have to choose between paying the electric bill or buying enough food for the week." Another parent told us, "Every dollar matters. One unexpected expense can throw everything off."

First, child support.

Child support is meant to support children, but right now, most of it never reaches them. Families on RI Works only receive the first \$50 of monthly child support, even though federal rules allow states to pass through more without penalty. That extra support could mean groceries, gas to get to work, diapers, or school supplies. When more child support goes directly to families, it reduces stress for parents, supports children, and encourages more consistent payments from noncustodial parents who know the money is going to their children.

One parent in our research shared, "My child's father wants to help, but it feels pointless when most of the money never reaches us." Another caregiver told us, "That support is supposed to help my kids. We stretch every dollar already."

Second, housing stability.

Families in subsidized housing are already doing everything they can to keep their families safe and stable in a very expensive housing market. Yet RI Works automatically reduces its benefits by \$65 each month, even as food, utilities, and transportation costs keep rising. That \$65 can be the difference between stability and crisis. Eliminating this reduction would help families meet basic needs and stay housed. Housing stability should be supported, not penalized.

Through SISTA Fire’s housing research, families consistently described the impossible tradeoffs they face. One resident shared, “My rent keeps going up, but my paycheck doesn’t.” Another said, “I’m paying so much for housing that there’s nothing left for food after utilities.” We have heard from parents doubling up with family members, skipping meals, and falling behind on bills while trying to avoid eviction or homelessness.

Third, benefit levels.

RI Works benefits still leave families far below the poverty line, even though most people in the program are children, about 68 percent. Deep poverty harms children’s health, learning, and long-term outcomes. Raising benefits to 100 percent of the Federal Poverty Level would give parents the stability they need to work, train, or attend school. Importantly, this increase can be fully funded through the existing federal TANF block grant without new state general revenue.

Families have told us clearly what inadequate benefits mean in real life. One mother shared, “You never get ahead. You survive one emergency at a time.” Another parent told us, “I want to work and build stability, but everything costs more than what we bring in.”

Finally, access for Legal Permanent Residents.

In 2008, Rhode Island imposed a five-year waiting period that blocks families with lawful permanent residency from accessing RI Works cash assistance and workforce supports. These families live, work, pay taxes, and raise children in Rhode Island, yet are denied access to programs that help them gain skills and secure stable employment. This bill would remove the five-year waiting period so families can access workforce training and other supports sooner and build long-term economic stability for their children.

Many immigrant families already contribute deeply to Rhode Island communities while facing tremendous barriers. One parent shared with us, “We do everything we are supposed to do. We work, pay taxes, and raise our children here, but when we need help, the door is closed.” Another caregiver explained, “We are trying to build a future for our children, but it feels like we are punished for needing support.”

Together, these updates would lift children out of poverty, support parents in the workforce, and strengthen Rhode Island’s economy. Rhode Island families are telling us what they need to survive and build stability. We hope we can count on your support to make RI Works work better for the families it was designed to serve.

For these reasons, SISTA Fire urges the committee to pass HB-7689.