



May 14, 2026

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

RE: Written Testimony in Support of House Bill 7706 — Joint Resolution Making an Appropriation of \$500,000 to the United Way of Rhode Island for the 211 Human Services Hotline

Dear Chair Abney and Members of the House Finance Committee:

On behalf of the Board of Directors for United Way of Rhode Island, I, Paola Fernández, write to express our Board's unequivocal and united support for House Bill H7706, which would increase the state appropriation for United Way 211 from \$200,000 to \$500,000. This investment would help sustain and strengthen Rhode Island's 24/7, multilingual, and confidential helpline that connects individuals and families to critical health and human services.

In 2025 alone, 211 responded to nearly 100,000 calls, texts, emails, and in-person inquiries from Rhode Islanders in need. Behind every contact is a constituent navigating a challenge — whether it is a parent seeking safe shelter, a caregiver needing support, or a neighbor experiencing a mental health crisis. In many cases, 211 is the first — and sometimes the only — trusted resource that people turn to in moments of urgency and uncertainty.

United Way 211 is also a national leader in call center navigation. According to United Way Worldwide's national 211 data report, United Way of Rhode Island handles the **7th most calls and contacts per capita** among 211 systems nationally. This demonstrates both the scale of need in Rhode Island and the strength of UWRI's continued innovation in ensuring Rhode Islanders remain connected to essential services.

We are proud that 211 operates as Rhode Island's front door to social services — relieving pressure on emergency services, supporting state agencies, and helping nonprofits deliver timely care. The increased state appropriation would support these services and help 211 continue to grow and strengthen as a key public infrastructure component of Rhode Island's service delivery system. With federal budget threats looming for critical safety net programs like SNAP, Medicaid, and behavioral health, this system will become even more vital in the months and years ahead.

211 investment is also fiscally responsible. Earlier 211 cost-savings research estimates that every \$1 invested in 211 returns approximately \$7.50 to the state, largely due to reduced reliance on emergency interventions and faster access to preventative support.



On behalf of the full Board of Directors at United Way of Rhode Island, I urge you to support House Bill 7706 and an increased state investment in the 211 system. This investment improves the resilience and well-being of Rhode Islanders while strengthening the infrastructure our state relies on to connect people to help when they need it most.

Thank you for your leadership and commitment to strengthening Rhode Island's safety net.

Sincerely,

Paola Fernandez

Chair, Board of Directors
United Way of Rhode Island