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February 17, 2022

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

RE: Support for Article 1 – Community Wellness Centers

Dear Chairman Abney and Members of the Finance Committee,

I am writing today to enthusiastically support the proposal in Article 1 to use ARPA monies for the development of municipal community wellness centers in compliance with Treasury rules and regulations. Specifically, page 3 of Article 1 provides for a “Municipal and Higher Ed Matching Grant Program” under “Federal Funds- Capital Projects Fund” for \$23,360,095 a year for the next two years. ***This proposal would allow Central Falls to apply for this money as Central Falls currently does not have a community center.***

As you may know, Central Falls was hit disproportionately hard by COVID and yet received disproportionately less ARPA monies than lesser-hit municipalities because ARPA monies were distributed by population, not by necessity. As a majority-minority municipality, Central Falls consistently experienced the state’s highest rates of COVID-19 infection and hospitalization, leaving countless families – most who are of color and many who are undocumented – scrambling for help, and our beloved small businesses struggling to stay afloat. As Rhode Island’s densest city, Central Falls was not categorized as a metropolitan city deserving of more funding in the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021. The result is that Central Falls received less “Rescue” dollars than the towns of Smithfield, South Kingstown, Westerly and others. The damage that COVID did both to the people and the economy of Central Falls was certainly more severe than some of the towns set to receive more dollars than our city. While the American Rescue Plan Act was designed to spark a strong economic comeback, funds earmarked for Central Falls were determined without regard to the unique challenges presented by our city’s density, levels of infection, economic fallout, or other hurdles faced by our marginalized community.

Massachusetts faced a similar problem with the small municipalities of Chelsea, Everett, Methuen and Randolph. In order to “right this wrong,” Governor Baker chose to apportion \$109 million in state ARPA monies directly to these municipalities stating that, “These four communities were disproportionately impacted by the virus, and this additional funding will support critical local COVID response and recovery efforts.”

We hope that the General Assembly also takes this approach as well as supporting specific budget proposals that will safeguard communities like Central Falls in the future from disease and death as well as support Central Falls’ recovery from the pandemic. A

community and senior center focused on wellness is critical to the future of Central Falls. COVID-19 was not just a disease that impacted the bodies of residents in our city. It whipsawed a major increase in other issues ranging from domestic violence, substance abuse, lead poisoning, mental health issues in young people and in adults and student attendance and performance. While many other cities and towns used their senior or community center to handle testing or vaccinations, Central Falls had neither a community center nor a senior center and was forced to use private facilities or school gymnasiums. We believe that a Center focused on the rescue and recovery of our residents will drive positive change in the wake of this pandemic.

For these reasons, on behalf of the residents of Central Falls, thank you for your consideration and I hope you can support this budget provision.

Sincerely Yours,



Maria Rivera
Mayor

Cc: Rep. Scott Slater, First Vice Chair
Rep. Alex Marszalkowski, Second Vice Chair
Rep. Gregg Amore
Rep. Jacquelyn Baginski
Rep. Jean-Philippe Barros
Rep. Grace Diaz
Rep. John Edwards
Rep. Raymond Hull
Rep. George Nardone
Rep. William O'Brien
Rep. Robert Quattrocchi
Rep. Deborah Ruggiero
Rep. Carlos Tobon
Rep. Camille Vella-Wilkinson