

## **JOCELYN P. ANTONIO, MPH**

**Testimony on H-5495, Expanding Newborn Screening Authority**  
**House Health and Human Services Committee**  
**February 25, 2025**

Good afternoon, Chairperson Donovan and members of the House Health and Human Services Committee. My name is Jocelyn Antonio, and I serve as the Director of Program Implementation and Policy at the Hassenfeld Child Health Innovation Institute at the Brown University School of Public Health. I am providing this testimony in my personal capacity.

I strongly urge your support for **H-5495 – An Act Relating to Health and Safety – Maternal and Child Health Services for Children with Special Health Care Needs**, sponsored by Representative Kislak.

This legislation seeks to authorize midwives, nurse practitioners, and physician assistants attending newborns to initiate newborn screening tests for conditions where early detection and treatment offer medical benefits.

### **The Public Health Importance of Newborn Screening**

Newborn screening is a critical and highly successful public health measure that enables the early identification of congenital disorders, allowing for timely interventions that can significantly improve health outcomes and prevent irreversible damage.<sup>1</sup> According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), newborn screening detects over 12,000 cases of genetic and metabolic disorders annually in the U.S. Additionally, Rhode Island's Newborn Screening Program identifies dozens of newborns each year with conditions that, if left untreated, could lead to severe disability or death. Expanding the authority to initiate newborn screening tests to midwives, nurse practitioners, and physician assistants ensures that all Rhode Island newborns receive the best possible state in life.

Many of these healthcare providers are already trained to conduct newborn screening and can alleviate the burden on physicians. Furthermore, states like California and New York have already empowered these qualified healthcare professionals to initiate newborn screenings, ensuring that no infant misses the opportunity for early diagnosis due to provider limitations.<sup>2</sup>

### **Addressing Healthcare Disparities**

In many rural and underserved areas, midwives, nurse practitioners, and physician assistants are often the primary—or sole—healthcare providers available to mothers and their newborns. Delays in newborn screening can lead to severe neurological damage, developmental delays, and even infant mortality. In Rhode Island, where 14% of births occur in federally designated healthcare shortage areas, timely screening is crucial. By permitting these professionals to order newborn screening tests, House Bill 5495

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<sup>1</sup> Health, "Newborn Screening as a Public Health Program"; CDC, "About Newborn Screening."

<sup>2</sup> California Department of Public Health, "Newborn Screening Program."

directly addresses healthcare disparities, ensuring equitable access to essential preventive services across all communities in Rhode Island.

### **Optimizing Healthcare Resources**

Allowing a broader range of healthcare providers to perform newborn screenings can lead to more efficient use of healthcare resources and reduce costs associated with late diagnose. According to the March of Dimes, the lifetime cost of care for an untreated metabolic disorder can exceed \$1 million per child, whereas early intervention can significantly reduce medical costs and improve long-term health outcomes. Additionally, studies have found that congenital hearing loss screening can reduce education costs by over \$115,600 over one child's lifetime.<sup>3</sup> Expanding provider authority aligns with the modern, team-based healthcare model that prioritizes patient-centered care and prevention over costly interventions.

### **Conclusion**

House Bill 5495 represents a proactive step toward enhancing the health and well-being of Rhode Island's newborns. By expanding the authority to initiate newborn screenings to midwives, nurse practitioners, and physician assistants, we can ensure timely detection and treatment of conditions that, if left unaddressed, could lead to significant morbidity or mortality. I urge the committee to support this vital legislation, reinforcing our commitment to comprehensive and equitable healthcare for all residents of our state.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

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<sup>3</sup> Wilkinson, "Newborn Screening Saves Lives and Money."

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