



**To:** House Health and Human Services Committee

**From:** Ditra Edwards, Executive Director SISTA Fire,

**Date:** March 13, 2025

**Re:** House Bill 5861- Insurance Coverage of Licensed Certified Lactation Counselors

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SISTA Fire is one of the members in the **Coalition to Improve RI Maternal Care** advocating to pass **House Bill 5861** to require insurance coverage for the services of **Licensed Certified Lactation Counselors (LCLCs)**. The coalition is dedicated to improving maternal health care by expanding access to lactation support workers who provide essential education and guidance to families as they establish a breastfeeding (or chestfeeding) relationship with their infants.

**Breastfeeding provides significant health benefits** for both babies and parents. It reduces the risk of:

- **Asthma, obesity, type 1 diabetes, and severe lower respiratory disease**
- **Ear infections, sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS), and gastrointestinal infections** (including vomiting and diarrhea)
- **Necrotizing enterocolitis (NEC)** — a life-threatening condition in pre-term infants

Breastfeeding parents also benefit from a reduced risk of **breast and ovarian cancer, type 2 diabetes, and high blood pressure**. The American Association of Pediatrics recommends exclusive breastfeeding for approximately **six months** after birth, and continued breastfeeding alongside appropriate complementary foods for **two years or longer** as mutually desired by parent and child.

### **Impact on Communities of Color**

Despite these benefits, significant racial disparities persist in breastfeeding rates and access to lactation support:

- Black infants are **16.7 percentage points less likely** to be breastfed than white infants.
- Hospitals in communities of color are less likely to offer immediate skin-to-skin contact, rooming-in, and lactation support — all of which improve breastfeeding success.
- Cultural stigma, historical trauma, and structural barriers (like lack of workplace accommodations) disproportionately impact Black and Brown parents.

Expanding access to lactation support through **House Bill 5861** will address these inequities by ensuring families of color receive the culturally competent care they need to establish and maintain breastfeeding.

At **SISTA Fire**, we aim to build and sustain an intergenerational community of women and non-binary people of color in Rhode Island, united to advance our collective power for social, economic, and political liberation. Improving access to lactation support is a critical step toward achieving health equity and empowering our communities.

**SISTA Fire strongly supports House Bill 5861** and urges its passage. With your leadership, we can strengthen maternal and child health outcomes and close the racial breastfeeding gap in Rhode Island. Thank you for the opportunity to provide this testimony.