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**Testimony on H-5497, Early Childhood Mental Health Hub
House Health & Human Services Committee
March 18, 2025**

Good afternoon, Chairperson Donovan and members of the House Health & Human Services Committee. My name is **Elizabeth Burke Bryant**, and I am a Professor of the Practice of Health Services, Policy and Practice at the Brown School of Public Health where I am based at the Hassenfeld Child Health Innovation Institute. I am providing this testimony in my individual capacity.

I am here to provide my strong support for H-5497 – An Act Relating to Insurance – Insurance Coverage for Mental Illness and Substance Use Disorders, sponsored by Representative Fogarty and co-sponsored by Representatives Carson, Dawson, Cortvriend, Noret, Kazarian, Donovan, Alzate, Ajello, and McGaw.

If passed, this legislation **would require the RI Executive Office of Health and Human Services (EOHHS) to establish an Early Childhood Mental Health Hub, a centralized resource aimed at improving access to qualified mental health professionals for young children (under 6 years old) and their families.**

House Bill 5497 directs EOHHS to develop a budget and seek funding for a three-year pilot to focus on training and supporting infant and early childhood mental health professionals to adopt and implement evidence-based practices. This initiative would:

- 1) Train and support infant and early childhood mental health professionals to adopt and implement evidence-based practices.
- 2) Maintain a registry of infant and early childhood mental health professionals and their qualifications and help connect families to services.
- 3) Monitor the availability of services, new national recommendations, and advancements in interventions/therapies.
- 4) Make recommendations annually to Medicaid and behavioral health systems to address gaps.

The Importance of Early Childhood Mental Health

Early childhood is a **critical period** for emotional and psychological development. As Harvard's Center for the Developing Child reports, during the first few years of life, more than **one million new neural connections** form every second.¹ These connections, shaped by early experiences, lay the foundation for a child's future **learning capacity, health, and behavior**.

According to the Right from the Start Campaign, the percentage of young children enrolled in Medicaid who presented with serious emotional disturbances has more than doubled, increasing from 10% in 2017 to 22% in 2024. If left unaddressed, these disturbances can lead to **lifelong challenges**, including:²

- **Impaired academic and cognitive performance**
- **Increased risk of physical health problems**
- **Higher likelihood of incarceration and homelessness**
- **Difficulties in building and maintaining relationships³**

Addressing mental health concerns early can **prevent more severe issues** later in life, ensuring that children grow into healthier, more resilient adults.

Long term cost savings: Research shows that **early prevention and treatment** is **far more cost-effective** than treating severe mental health disorders later in life

According to the Zero to Three, despite more frequent attention to children/youth mental health, early childhood mental health is largely ignored. As a baby grows through infancy, toddlerhood, and the preschool years, each experience – positive or negative – becomes a building block for their future wellness. We can do more to help very young children and their families build a strong foundation and support them when they face mental health challenges.

¹ Harvard Center for the Developing Child, "Early Childhood Development: The First Five Years," 2019.

Establishment of a RI Early Childhood Mental Health Hub was a key recommendation of the RI Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Task Force Plan, issued by the Task Force in 2023.

I would like to thank Representative Fogarty and the co-sponsors of this bill for their hard work and leadership on this issue. **I strongly urge this committee and the full Senate to pass this important bill that will strengthen Rhode Island's Early Childhood Mental Health System and help to ensure the healthy development of Rhode Island's young children.**