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Testimony on H-5497, Early Childhood Mental Health Hub
House Health & Human Services Committee
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Good afternoon, Chairperson Donovan and members of the House Health & 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 express 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.

This legislation seeks 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.**

The Importance of Early Childhood Mental Health

Early childhood is a **critical period** for emotional and psychological development. 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 **Right from the Start**, 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 relationships**³

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

Current Challenges in Accessing Early Childhood Mental Health Services

¹ Center on the Developing Child, "Brain Architecture."

² "Early Childhood Mental Health."

³ President, "9 Long-Term Effects of Ignoring a Child's Mental Health Issues"; Mental Health America, "Prevention and Early Intervention in Mental Health-Consequences of Failing Our Children."

There is a **severe shortage** of mental health professionals trained specifically in **infant and early childhood mental health**. According to the **American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry**, Rhode Island has only **28 child and adolescent psychiatrists**, with just **7 of them serving the core cities**.⁴ This shortage is alarming given that, according to the **2024 Rhode Island Kids Count Factbook**

- **28.7%** children ages **3 to 17** in Rhode Island have a **mental, emotional, or behavioral health problem**
- **59%** of children ages **3 to 17** who needed mental health treatment **could not access the care they needed**⁵

Additionally, **disparities in mental health access** persist:

- **Children in poverty** are **2 to 3 times** more likely to develop mental health condition than their peers⁶
- **Children from low-income families** show higher rates of behavior problems throughout their first **15 years of life**⁷
- A **2024 KFF report** found that **12% of adults** thought they or their children needed mental health services but didn't seek them – primarily due **cost concerns**. These rates were even higher among **Hispanic and Black families**.⁸

In **2022**, the **Rhode Island Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics**, **Rhode Island Council for Child and Adolescent Psychiatry**, **Hasbro Children's Hospital**, and **Bradley Hospital** jointly declared a **Rhode Island State of Emergency in Child and Adolescent Mental Health**. They urged state leaders to **expand community-based behavioral health services**, emphasizing **prevention and early intervention**.⁹

Proposed Solution: Early Childhood Mental Health Hub Program

House Bill 5497 mandates the **Executive Office of Health and Human Services (EOHHS)** to develop a budget and secure funding for an **Early Childhood Mental Health Hub program**. This initiative would:

- **Centralize resources** and streamline mental health service delivery
- **Provide specialized services** tailored for infants and young children
- **Improve access** to early childhood mental health
- **Support families** in navigating the mental health system

Anticipated Public Health Benefits

- **Improved Developmental Outcomes**

⁴ AACAP, "Child and Adolescent Psychiatrist Finder."

⁵ Rhode Island Kids Count, "The Factbook."

⁶ Rhode Island Kids Count.

⁷ Kim et al., "Diverging Trajectories of Child Externalizing Behavior by Family Economic Status at Birth."

⁸ Panchal et al., "Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Mental Health Care."

⁹ Rhode Island Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics et al., "Declaration of a Rhode Island State of Emergency in Child and Adolescent Mental Health," 2022.

- Early intervention promotes **emotional regulation, self-esteem, and cognitive development in children**
- Strengthens **social skills and coping mechanisms**¹⁰
- **Family Support**
 - A centralized hub simplifies access to care, **providing timely and appropriate services**
 - Enhances **parenting practices** and strengthens **family dynamics**
- **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
 - **Parent-Child Interaction Therapy (PCIT)** – a recommended state-supported training- has been shown to yield **\$3.64 return per dollar of invested**¹¹
 - **Child-Parent Psychotherapy (CPP)**, per the University of California, San Francisco, offers an estimated **\$15.96 in benefits per dollar spent**¹²

Investing in early intervention not only benefits children and families but also reduces long-term state expenditures on mental health, education, and social services.

Conclusion

Mental health matters. It is just as important as physical health. Mental health shapes how we **think, feel, act**, as well as how we **manage stress, build relationships, and make life choices**.

When mental health concerns are **identified and addressed early**, we can **redirect** a child's developmental trajectory and ensure they are set up for success. House Bill 5497 represents an investment in **prevention, treatment, and access**—ensuring that **Rhode Island's youngest and most vulnerable children** receive the mental health care they need **before problems escalate**.

By passing this bill, Rhode Island can take a **proactive stance in supporting children's mental health from the earliest years**—sending a clear message that **we value and prioritize the well-being of our children**.

I urge your strong consideration and passage of House Bill 5497.

Thank you for your time and consideration,

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¹⁰ Meng, "Factors Associated With Not Receiving Mental Health Services Among Children With A Mental Disorder in Early Childhood in the United States, 2021–2022."

¹¹ Zero to Three and Manatt Health, "The Basics of Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health: A Briefing Paper."

¹² "Research."

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