

To: House Health and Human Service Committee

From: RI Association for Infant Mental Health (RIAIMH), Sheila Grant Orphanides, Professional Development and Susan Dickstein, Executive Director

Date: March 18, 2025

- **Subject: Support for H-5497 (Fogarty),** the state will develop a budget and seek funding to pilot an Infant & Early Childhood Mental Health Professional Hub.

RIAIMH is writing to support H-5497, which would require the state to develop a budget and seek funding for a three-year pilot Mental Health Professional Hub to train and support infant and early childhood mental health professionals to adopt and implement evidence-based practices. RIAIMH is a non-profit professional organization that offers expertise in infant and early childhood mental health, with the goal of ensuring that all infants and young children in RI thrive within strong relationships with their caregivers.

Infants/young children can and do suffer mental health challenges--supporting mental health in the early years prevents worsening of symptoms and reduces need for more costly interventions required when challenges go unaddressed. The mental health of young children depends on consistent and nurturing relationships with parents/caregivers in the context of family, community, and culture; positive social emotional development in the context of healthy relationships is a necessary foundation for young children to succeed and thrive. Early social and economic adversity/trauma, often associated with parent/caregiver stress, and systemic barriers, contributes to infant mental health (IMH) challenges within a service system that is not well prepared to address them.

IMH promotion, prevention, and intervention is difficult multi-generational work that requires specialized knowledge, training, and core skills. The current social and economic climate has intensified family stress and mental health challenges, and has directly impacted levels of workforce stress, burnout, and turnover. There is a shortage in RI of providers within the IMH workforce who have the specialized knowledge, skill, and training to effectively identify/intervene and address infant/early childhood mental health challenges that arise. There are gaps in expertise in evidence based dyadic therapy, developmentally appropriate and family centered assessment and diagnosis. The proposed professional HUB will support and create intentional activities to enhance workforce competency, so IMH professionals are better positioned to support positive mental health outcomes for infants, young children and families. Therefore, RIAIMH affirms the benefits of the creation of an Early Childhood Mental Health Professional Hub to ensure that young children and their families have access to the types of care and support that are meaningful for each family, leading to better health outcomes and more equity in service delivery.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony. My colleagues and I are thankful for your continued leadership on issues related to child and family well-being and early care and education.

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