

RE: SUPPORT OF H6066 TEMPORARY CAREGIVER INSURANCE

Dear House of Representatives, my name is E. Denise Mathews, and I am writing in support of bill H6066 which expands Temporary Caregivers Insurance by increasing the wage reimbursement to 85%, and making sure it includes grandparents in siblings as eligible caregivers and ensure the self-employed can also participate in this much needed benefit.

I am a social worker and mom of a sweet and confident three-year-old who was born at the peak of COVID-19. Without any family or close friends to support us during those early days, being able to utilize TCI was a lifeline.

But today, I am here to speak in support of the over 121,000 family caregivers who provide unpaid care to their loved ones. I have the privilege of working closely with caregivers through the Family Caregiver Alliance of RI as part of an active network of support and advocacy for family caregivers in our state. Many don't even consider themselves a caregiver because they "just help out". And there isn't a day where I don't hear about the hardships, challenges but also joy and sense of pride that caregivers experience when they have to look after a family member who is aging or navigating life with a disability.

Specifically, I am incredibly concerned about the growing population of grandparents, siblings and other kinship caregivers who because of different life circumstances step in to care for their loved ones in a time of medical or family crisis without much support.

For example, I recently spoke to a pair of sisters who took guardianship of their older sister who has a developmental disability to ensure she continued to remain in her home after their parents passed. One of the sisters had to retire early to become a full-time unpaid caregiver and coordinate care, and other needs when the program their sister was in was not meeting her acute needs.

Or a grandmother who was awarded custody of her teen granddaughter due to difficult family circumstances. She suddenly became the parent of a teenager all over again but this time, the child in her care had a severe emotional disability that required grandma to take unpaid time from work to care for her during this time of destabilization.

As you know, we are an aging state but also a state that is home to a large population of individuals of all ages with a form of physical, developmental, neurological and or psychological disability. Family caregivers are struggling emotionally and financially to meet the needs of their loved ones which makes it harder for caregivers to care for themselves. The health outcomes reported by the 2021 RIDOH The Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance Survey showed alarming mental and physical health risks for those who provide care for others. This is in addition to the growing housing and food insecurity challenges our state faces.

TCI is a lifeline to many caregivers that can mean the difference between staying housed and unhoused. I urge you to consider this expansion for the many mothers, sisters, grandfathers, brothers, foster parents, fathers in Rhode Island who are in need of this network of care.

Your consideration of these matters and solutions is very much appreciated.

E. Denise Mathews

Program Officer - Family Caregiver Alliance of RI