



March 6, 2025

The Honorable, Evan P. Shanley, Chair

House State Government & Elections Committee

Rhode Island Statehouse

Providence, 02903

RE: Testimony in Support of House Bill Nos. 5452, 5337 & 5718 - AN ACT RELATING TO STATE AFFAIRS AND GOVERNMENT – DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN, YOUTH AND FAMILIES CHILD ADVOCATE OFFICE; DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN, YOUTH AND FAMILIES – THE POWERS AND SCOPE OF ACTIVITIES

On behalf of United Way of Rhode Island, we express our support for **House Bill No. 5452, House Bill No. 5377, and House Bill No. 5718**, recognizing that healthcare is an essential component of a thriving life and a key driver of economic stability. Through the LIFT UNITED initiative of our LIVE UNITED 2025 Strategic Plan, we work to ensure that all Rhode Islanders—regardless of income—have access to the healthcare services they need to live healthy, stable, and productive lives. Without access to quality healthcare, individuals and families face more significant financial hardship, workforce instability, and economic insecurity.

These bills present an opportunity to remove barriers to care, expand access to behavioral and mental health services, and address the health-related social determinants that impact overall well-being. This legislation will help build a stronger, healthier, more equitable Rhode Island.

Strengthening Youth Behavioral Health Services

House Bill No. 5452 – Establishing DCYF as the Chief Agency for Children’s Behavioral Health

The demand for youth mental health services has surged in Rhode Island, yet gaps in access and coordination persist. According to the 2023 Rhode Island Kids Count Factbook, 1 in 5 Rhode Island children (ages 3-17) have been diagnosed with a mental health condition, yet nearly half do not receive the treatment they need (RI Kids Count, 2023). **House Bill No. 5452** takes a crucial step in addressing this crisis by designating the Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF) as the

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lead agency for children's behavioral health. By ensuring a centralized, accountable structure, this bill promotes coordinated service delivery, improved early intervention, and stronger partnerships between schools, healthcare providers, and community-based organizations.

Further, United Way of Rhode Island's 211 helpline data underscores the urgent need for enhanced behavioral health services. In 2023 alone, over 5,200 calls to 211 were related to mental health and crisis intervention, reflecting a 17% increase from the previous year. This bill will help streamline access to care, ensuring that children experiencing mental health crises receive timely and appropriate interventions.

House Bill No. 5718 – Expanding DCYF's Authority to Oversee Comprehensive Behavioral Health Services

For children with serious emotional disturbances, developmental disabilities, and functional impairments, access to comprehensive behavioral health services is essential. **House Bill No. 5718** expands DCYF's authority to oversee and administer these critical services, ensuring that Rhode Island has a coordinated approach to supporting children with complex needs.

According to the 2023 Rhode Island Kids Count Factbook, only 38% of Rhode Island children with major depressive episodes received consistent mental health treatment, highlighting a significant gap in care (RI Kids Count, 2023). Many children who require specialized behavioral health interventions face long wait times, limited service availability, or fragmented care coordination. By giving DCYF expanded oversight, this bill helps ensure that children with serious emotional and developmental challenges receive the interventions they need before crises escalate.

Additionally, United Way's 211 helpline data shows that over 4,600 calls in 2023 were from parents and caregivers seeking mental health support for children with developmental disabilities, demonstrating the urgent need for a stronger, centralized system of care.

Ensuring Accountability in Child Welfare Services

House Bill No. 5377 – Implementing Child Advocate and Fatality Review Panel Recommendations

Rhode Island must do more to protect children in state care and ensure that systems responsible for their well-being are transparent and accountable. **House Bill No. 5377** mandates that DCYF implement recommendations from the Child Advocate and Child Fatality Review Panel within six months, reinforcing accountability measures that can prevent future tragedies.

The 2023 Rhode Island Kids Count Factbook reports that from 2017 to 2021, an average of 7 child

fatalities per year were linked to abuse, neglect, or unsafe sleep conditions (RI Kids Count, 2023). Many of these deaths could have been prevented through stronger oversight, enhanced case management, and faster response times. By requiring a structured, timely response from DCYF, this bill ensures that evidence-based interventions and systemic improvements are implemented without delay.

Additionally, United Way's 211 data reveals that families and guardians made over 3,800 calls in 2023 seeking child welfare and protective services, highlighting an urgent need for stronger oversight and improved service delivery. Implementing the Child Advocate's recommendations will ensure that child welfare policies are responsive, data-driven, and centered on protecting Rhode Island's most vulnerable children.

Healthcare is not a luxury but a fundamental right and a critical factor in economic stability. Ensuring all Rhode Islanders have access to affordable, high-quality care will lead to stronger communities, a healthier workforce, and reduced long-term financial strain on individuals and families. Supporting **House Bill No. 5452**, **House Bill No. 5377**, and **House Bill No. 5718** will help advance health equity, protect Rhode Island's most vulnerable children, and expand access to essential mental health services. We urge your support in making youth behavioral health and child welfare a priority for all Rhode Islanders.

Sincerely,

Elijah McLean

Manager, Government Relations & Policy

United Way Rhode Island

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