



March 6, 2025

The Honorable Evan P. Shanley  
Chair, House Committee on State Government and Elections  
State of Rhode Island General Assembly  
82 Smith Street  
Providence, RI 02903

**Re: Support for H5718**

Chair Shanley and Members of the House Committee on State Government and Elections,

**Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in strong support of H5718 relating to the responsibilities of the Rhode Island Department of Children, Youth and Families (DCYF).** Specifically, H5718 proposes to formalize DCYF's oversight for all matters related to children's behavioral health, and to expand DCYF's powers by overseeing and administer comprehensive behavioral health services for children with serious emotional disturbances and children with developmental or functional disabilities. **Passage of this bill is critical to ensure our children and youth receive effective and coordinated behavioral healthcare.**

My name is Margaret Holland McDuff, and I am CEO of FSRI. FSRI is a behavioral health and social service organization with the mission "to advance equity, hope, and opportunity in our communities." FSRI has been serving Rhode Islanders for decades, including programming to support healthy child development, provide essential behavioral health services, and coordinate crisis intervention programs that help children and families thrive.

FSRI is a provider of residential, foster care, and community-based services under contract with DCYF. This includes three trauma-informed residential programs for youth and young adults, a foster care program currently providing care to 22 children and youth, and a variety of community-based supports – SafeCare, an evidence-based parenting education program for guardians of children age 0-5; Trauma Systems Therapy (TST) Community, a therapy model for children and adolescents who have experienced traumatic events; and a Family Coaching and Visitation program, to name a few.

H5718 is essential to clarifying DCYF's responsibility over children's behavioral health, and ensuring a seamless and effective continuum of care for children and youth in need of services. While DCYF currently oversees children's behavioral health, H5718 clearly defines and formalizes the department's authority in this area and ensures they are provided the full power and resources to manage this critical role. Among other things, this is critical to ensuring that children with complex behavioral health needs will not suffer from gaps in care due to inconsistent communication across various state agencies and providers, and also ensure care is



provided in the least restrictive level. Additionally, the bill provides the framework for how DCYF should coordinate children's behavioral health services, ensuring that services are delivered through a comprehensive system of care that is accessible, coordinated, child-centered, trauma-informed, and culturally responsive. Through this framework, services for children and youth will be streamlined, reducing delays in care, prioritize early intervention and wraparound supports to prevent crises, and ensure that services are delivered in the least restrictive setting, i.e. prioritizing community-based care over residential placements.

What we need is a commitment and investment in DCYF's oversight of children's behavioral health through passage of this bill, not a change of the entire system. In fact, with all of the federal changes we are currently seeing, moving anything now will result in additional time and money that our state cannot afford.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment in strong support of this critical bill, and please feel free to contact me with any questions or follow-up.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Margaret Holland McDuff', written in a cursive style.

Margaret Holland McDuff  
CEO