

STATE OF RHODE ISLAND



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March 30, 2026

The Honorable Susan R. Donovan, Chair
House Committee on Health and Human Services
State House
Providence, RI 02903

RE: 2026 — H 7994 — An Act Relating to State Affairs and Government – Department of Children, Youth and Families – The Powers and Scope of Activities

Dear Chair Donovan:

Please accept this letter regarding H 7994, which seeks to expand Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF) oversight of comprehensive behavioral health services for children with serious emotional disturbances and children with developmental or functional disabilities.

Behavioral health is defined as the prevention and treatment of mental and substance use disorders.¹ BHDDH is the Single State Agency (SSA)² for mental health and for substance use disorder prevention and treatment, as well as the state opioid treatment authority (SOTA). H 7994 will cause a disruption to the system and continuum of care as BHDDH has statutory authority for children's substance use, adult mental health and substance use, and has the specialized expertise for administering comprehensive mental health and substance use prevention, treatment, and recovery services through decades of working with the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA).

BHDDH has unique experience in planning and implementing behavioral health prevention services. In particular, BHDDH has administered the statewide network of community prevention coalitions (RI Substance Abuse Prevention Act) since its inception in 1987 and the RI Student Assistance Program since 1986. Prevention coalitions provide behavioral health prevention services to children and adults, including older adults. As such, BHDDH has the specialized expertise to provide comprehensive behavioral healthcare services across the lifespan.

BHDDH receives federal grants for behavioral health prevention and treatment which are utilized to provide services to children, youth, and adults. The Substance Abuse Prevention, Treatment and Recovery Block Grant requires states to enforce the prohibition on the sale of tobacco products to underage individuals as a condition for receipt of the Block Grant. As the recipient of this Block Grant in our capacity as the SSA for substance use disorders, BHDDH is responsible for ensuring compliance with this requirement. Transferring responsibility for children's substance use services to DCYF would jeopardize these grants, many of which do not limit services by age.

¹ [42 C.F.R. § 483.40](#); Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, [“About Us”](#); Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, [“About Behavioral Health”](#); American Medical Association, [“What is behavioral health?”](#).

² [42 U.S.C. § 300x-32](#).

Additionally, BHDDH holds the FDA contract to enforce the federal ban on underage tobacco sales which is coordinated with Synar compliance efforts. Separating these initiatives may cause disruption which also may jeopardize the FDA contract.

Loss of federal funding would severely impact the availability of substance use services. In this climate of federal funding uncertainty, we cannot afford to disrupt established and effective programs.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this legislation.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Richard Leclerc".

Richard Leclerc
Director

cc: The Honorable Members of the House Committee on Health and Human Services
The Honorable Julie A. Casimiro
Nicole McCarty, Esquire, Chief Legal Counsel to the Speaker of the House
Lynne Urbani, Director of House Policy