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March 30, 2026

The Honorable Susan R. Donovan  
Chairwoman  
Health and Human Services Committee  
Rhode Island House of Representatives  
State House  
Providence, RI 02903

**RE: H7994 — SUPPORT**

Dear Chairwoman Donovan and distinguished members of the Committee,

On behalf of Community Care Alliance, I am writing in support of **H7994**.

Rhode Island is at a pivotal moment. Through the ongoing federal consent decree, the state is on the verge of building a more robust, community-based children's behavioral health system. One that is designed specifically to meet the unique developmental needs of children and families timely and effectively. This progress reflects years of work and a shared commitment to doing better for Rhode Island's children.

As this system takes shape, **it is critical that we strengthen, not disrupt, this momentum.** H7994 would help the state take an important step by reaffirming the central role of the Department of Children, Youth and Families (DCYF) in leading and overseeing the children's behavioral health system. Maintaining strong leadership and accountability within DCYF is essential to ensuring continuity, compliance with the consent decree, and a sustained focus on child-centered care.

Community Care Alliance has a history of collaboration with DCYF since its inception. As a community based organization, we provide homebased intensive and outpatient behavioral health services for children, youth and families. DCYF is a consistent referral source owing to the reality that Woonsocket has one of the highest rates of abuse and neglect in the State of RI. As such, we consistently address trauma and serious emotional disorders at the family level within the context of our services. In addition, CCA operates a visitation program funded by DCYF whereby behavioral health services are provided to parents working toward reunification and subsequent to children being returned to reside with their families. CCA also operates the Family Care Community Partnership program providing wraparound supports to families preventatively to reduce or avert their involvement with the child welfare system; these families often are in need of behavioral health services. DCYF and CCA jointly the Northern RI Care Coordination Collaboration that meets with families and multiple stakeholders to develop a wraparound plan tailored to their goals. These families often are challenged with complex needs that require multiple systems and organizations to be involved. This process has been highly successful and is instrumental in working in a more coordinated manner.

**7994 — SUPPORT**

**Testimony from Benedict F. Lessing, Jr., MSW**

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We have serious concerns with proposals in the Governor's FY2027 budget; specifically **Article 8 (Sections 1 and 2) and Article 10 (Section 2)**, which would further consolidate behavioral health authority under the Department of Behavioral Healthcare, Developmental Disabilities and Hospitals (BHDDH). The proposed change in governance is not appropriate and would cause harm particularly for families with complex behavioral health needs. BHDDH has neither the knowledge as their history and service array has been primarily individually, adult and disability oriented. Second, families (particularly those involved with child welfare) encompass multiple systems level coordination to include early childhood development, pediatric healthcare, WIC, childcare, pre k- high school education, housing, foster care, family court etc. BHDDH is simply not equipped nor has it had the mission to work with families at this level in a competent manner. We foresee this governance shift creating chaos and greater confusion for families.

Children's behavioral health is not simply a smaller version of the adult system. It requires specialized services, family engagement, and a prevention-focused approach that reflects the distinct needs of children. Preserving clear leadership and accountability within DCYF helps ensure these needs remain front and center.

We respectfully urge you to support **H7994** to reinforce DCYF's leadership role; and carefully reconsider any budget language that would shift authority away from DCYF during this critical implementation period.

Rhode Island has an opportunity to build a system that truly works for children and families. We must stay the course and reaffirm our commitment to the consent decree and the progress already underway.

Thank you for your consideration and your continued commitment to Rhode Island's children and families.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Benedict F. Lessing, Jr.", with a stylized flourish at the end.

**Benedict F. Lessing, Jr. MSW**  
President and CEO  
Community Care Alliance