



Communities for People

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March 30, 2026

The Honorable Susan R. Donovan, Chairwoman
RI House Health and Human Services Committee

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF H7994

Dear Chairwoman Donovan and members of the Committee,

I am writing in support of **H7994**, an important bill that re-affirms the statutory role of DCYF as the state agency responsible for comprehensive child and family wellbeing. Regretfully, this legislation is critically needed, as several efforts in this year's budget articles—**Article 8 (Sections 1 and 2) and Article 10 (Section 2)**, can be interpreted as moving the authority and responsibility for children's behavioral health away from DCYF and into RI's BHDDH. While BHDDH provides a statewide system for behavioral health supports for adults, it is ill-equipped to develop and implement such a system for children and youth.

Quite simply, services to support vulnerable children (and their families) are inherently 'messy'. Children's needs and presenting problems do not readily fall into categories that mirror state departments or bureaucracies. For instance, consider a youth who initially appears to present with juvenile delinquency behaviors. Upon investigation, one can learn that there is long-standing neglect in the home. Or abuse. Or substance abuse, Or undiagnosed mental health concerns. Or any combination of these. In states where these functions are separated by different state agencies, given inevitable budget pressures, all too often there is 'finger pointing', claiming the other state agency must take responsibility. This leads, at best, to fragmentation and frequent lack of coordination, or at worst, children and families falling through cracks and not receiving services until the conditions become more severe and require more intensive interventions.

Communities for People has had the honor and privilege of serving approximately 200 youth and families each day throughout the state. For close to 50 years, I cannot think of a single youth whose problems had a singular cause. I congratulate our state on getting many things "right". The enabling legislation creating DCYF as the state agency for comprehensive children's services is indeed one of them.

We are at a critical juncture—under a federal consent decree requiring that we bolster our children's behavioral health system. As this system takes shape, **it is critical that we strengthen this momentum, not allow for possible fragmentation.** 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.

Children's behavioral health requires a very different set of interventions and approaches than the adult system. It requires a family systems-competent approach, developmentally appropriate services, and a

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focus on prevention, all focused on the distinct needs of children. Preserving clear leadership and accountability within DCYF helps ensure these needs remain front and center.

Please act favorably upon this bill and carefully reconsider any budget language that would shift authority away from DCYF during this critical time. You have the opportunity to ensure a coordinated and singularly accountable state agency to support the vulnerable children and families in our state.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Craig Gordon". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "C" and "G".

Craig Gordon
President and Chief Executive Officer