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March 30, 2026

The Honorable Susan R. Donovan, Chair
House Health and Human Services Committee
State of Rhode Island General Assembly

Re: Testimony in Support of H7994

Good afternoon Chair Donovan and Members of the Committee,

I am writing to express strong support for H7994, legislation that reaffirms and clarifies the role of the Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF) as the lead agency for Rhode Island's system of care for children and youth.

While the bill has been described as expanding the scope and authority of DCYF, in practice it does something more important and more pragmatic—it clarifies, modernizes, and aligns existing responsibilities to reflect how services must function today.

H7994 updates statutory language to reflect the reality that children's behavioral health, child welfare, and related supports must operate as a coordinated, accountable system. It provides needed clarity about DCYF's role in overseeing that system, including the development of a Medicaid-aligned framework for children's behavioral health services.

This clarity is especially critical at this moment.

Rhode Island is actively working to meet the requirements of the Department of Justice consent decree and to advance its Olmstead Plan—both of which call for a coordinated, community-based system of care for children and youth with complex needs. Achieving those goals requires clear leadership, defined accountability, and alignment across systems.

DCYF is uniquely positioned to serve in this role. The agency holds deep expertise in child development, family systems, and the intersection of behavioral health and child welfare—expertise that is essential to designing and overseeing an effective children's system of care. Anchoring leadership within DCYF supports a

developmentally informed, family-centered approach.

Just as importantly, H7994 reinforces the principles at the heart of a children's system of care—centering youth and family voice and choice and ensuring that services are delivered in the least restrictive, most appropriate settings. These are not abstract goals; they are core requirements of both the consent decree and the state's Olmstead Plan. Clear statutory alignment is necessary to ensure the state can meet these obligations in practice.

By modernizing the statute and affirming DCYF's role, H7994 provides a timely and necessary foundation to support this work, strengthen system accountability, and ensure that children and families can access the right care, at the right time, in the right setting.

This is not about creating new authority—it is about ensuring that existing responsibilities are clearly defined, effectively coordinated, and aligned with federal expectations.

I respectfully urge the Committee to support H7994.

Thank you for your consideration and for your continued leadership on behalf of Rhode Island's children and families

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Susan C. Jacobsen". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Susan Jacobsen, LMHC
Chief Executive Officer
Child & Family Rhode Island