

April 8, 2026

Re: Testimony in Support of House Bills H8203, H7272, and H7626

Dear Chairperson and Members of the House Health Committee,

I am writing to provide testimony in strong support of House Bills H8203, H7272, and H7626, and in unwavering support of Newport Hospital's Noreen Stoner Drexel Birthing Center.

As happy as I am to hear that Brown University Health has made the decision for the Birthing Center to stay open contingent upon \$4.9 million in annual state and philanthropic investments, we need long-term solutions to secure this essential health care in Newport County.

The Birthing Center is not simply a unit within a hospital - it is a cornerstone of our healthcare system, a driver of equity, and, above all, a lifeline for families.

For generations, it has provided safe, compassionate, and community-centered care at one of the most critical moments in a family's life: the birth of a child. Each year, hundreds of babies are born at the Birthing Center. Beyond those numbers are real people - mothers, fathers, and loved ones - who depend on having safe, local access to labor and delivery services.

Its presence strengthens emergency preparedness and ensures continuity of care. Once a service like this is lost, it is extraordinarily difficult - if not impossible - to restore. When access is threatened, the consequences are not abstract; they are immediate, measurable, and potentially life-threatening. Not every family has reliable transportation, flexible employment and work schedules, or the financial means to repeatedly travel off-island for prenatal visits, labor, and postnatal care.

If the Birthing Center were to close or be reduced, expectant mothers on Aquidneck Island would be required to travel at least 30 to 45 minutes - often longer during peak traffic or severe weather - to reach the nearest hospital with obstetric services, typically in Providence. For communities like Newport County, defined by geographic isolation, that distance carries real consequences. Rhode Island may be small, but for island residents, access is not measured in miles alone - it is measured in time and in risk.

Data consistently shows that increased travel time to obstetric care is associated with higher rates of preterm birth, maternal complications, and neonatal risk. In urgent or emergent situations, that additional travel time is not just inconvenient - it can be dangerous. For a woman in active labor experiencing complications such as hemorrhage, preeclampsia, or fetal distress, that distance can mean the difference between a safe delivery, a medical emergency, and even death.

House Bill H8203 takes an important step toward ensuring transparency and accountability in healthcare decision-making, particularly when essential services are at stake. Communities deserve a voice when critical care services are under review, and this legislation helps ensure that

decisions are not made in isolation from those most affected. Families deserve to know what is happening and why.

House Bill H7272 strengthens oversight and helps safeguard against abrupt or unjustified reductions in care. Healthcare institutions serve the public trust, and with that comes a responsibility to maintain services that meet community needs. This bill reinforces that obligation and recognizes that responsibility extends beyond financial considerations to the health and well-being of the communities served.

House Bill H7626 acknowledges the unique challenges faced by communities like Newport that are geographically distinct. It ensures that regional considerations, including access barriers and emergency response times, are factored into decisions about care delivery. Newport is not interchangeable with other parts of the state; limited access routes, seasonal congestion, and emergency response constraints must all be taken into account.

Together, these bills represent a comprehensive approach to protecting essential healthcare services and ensuring that communities are not left behind.

Beyond policy, this is about people. It is about the mother experiencing complications who cannot afford an additional 45 minutes in transit. It is about the working family without the means or flexibility to travel off-island for care. It is about maintaining equity in healthcare access, regardless of geography.

I ask you to consider the human reality: a mother in labor in the middle of the night, crossing bridges in winter conditions, hoping she arrives in time to give birth in a hospital; a family facing complications while navigating added distance and uncertainty to an already critical moment; a community learning that the place where generations have safely welcomed their children is no longer there when they need it most.

The Noreen Stoner Drexel Birthing Center is a cornerstone of our local healthcare system. Its value cannot be measured solely in financial terms - it must be measured in outcomes, in access, and in the trust it has built within the community. Its closure or reduction would not simply shift care elsewhere; it would introduce risk, inequity, and instability into one of the most vulnerable moments in healthcare.

I respectfully urge you to support H8203, H7272, and H7626, and to stand with the families of Newport County by protecting and preserving this essential service.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,
Stephanie Smyth