



SENATE FISCAL OFFICE

ISSUE BRIEF

Rhode Island Health Equity Zone (HEZ) Initiative

NOVEMBER 8, 2023

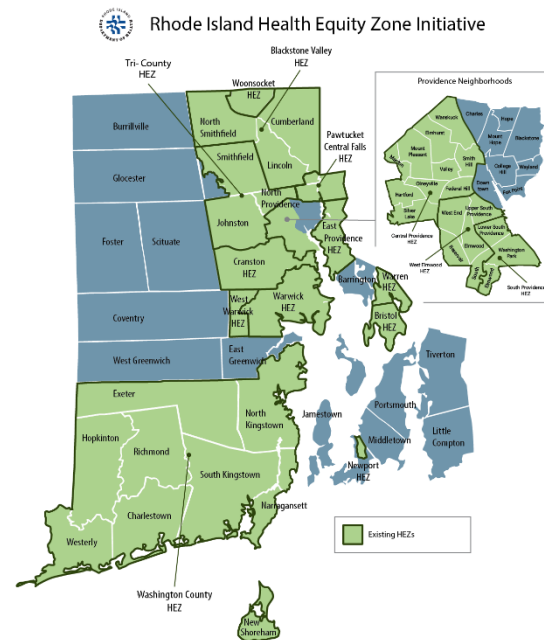
What is Rhode Island’s Health Equity Zone Initiative?

According to the Rhode Island Department of Health, the Health Equity Zone (HEZ) initiative is “strategically designed to resolve inefficiencies inherent in traditional public health prevention” by employing a ‘boots on the ground’ framework within disadvantaged communities¹. The HEZ initiative utilizes a community-based collaborative that employs preventative services that identify and reconcile health inequity within communities. As each community requires a different approach to services, a HEZ uses community health workers (CHW) with an understanding of the correct approach to provide and maintain services within these communities. Community health workers who support the HEZ initiative ensure that services are “culturally, socially, and medically relevant”, which results in an engaged community interested in working to better the overall health of their peers².

Currently, Rhode Island has 15 Health Equity Zones, each of which focus on different health equity measures. The Health Equity Institute, which partnered with the Department of Health and oversees the HEZ initiative, has identified five health equity measures: (1) Integrate Health Care, (2) Community Resiliency, (3) Physical Environment, (4) Socioeconomics, (5) Community Trauma³. Addressing these social determinants of health allows the Department to implement preventative measures that maintain and support healthy communities.

HEZ Theory of Change:

The HEZ initiative employs the *HEZ Theory of Change*, which the Department of Health developed. The theory emphasizes collaborative investments focusing on culturally and medically relevant needs in geographic areas that the traditional health infrastructure has historically neglected which will positively impact the socioeconomic disparities within these areas and improve overall health⁴. Essentially, the Department



¹ RI Department of Health (2022). *Rhode Island’s Health Equity Zone Initiative: Annual Report Summary for Fiscal Year 2020-2021*.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ RI Department of Health. *Health Equity Zones: A Toolkit for Building Healthy and Resilient Communities*.

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acknowledges a majority of health outcomes derive from our surrounding physical, social, political, and economic environment (otherwise known as social determinants of health)⁵. Poorer surroundings lead to poorer health. Rather than treat conditions arising from these poor surroundings, the Department theorizes that preventing conditions by improving a community’s overall environment would result in improved health. The HEZ initiative has been and continues to be developed around this framework.

Funding and Expenditures:

Over the last five state fiscal years (FY2020-FY2024), the RI Department of Health has budgeted a total of \$39.6 million in all funds for the Health Equity Zone initiative. Federal funds, including COVID-19 grants, make up about 65.3 percent of total funding. General revenue comprises 2.5 percent of total funding. In past years, the Department utilized restricted receipts and federal funds to fund a large portion of the HEZ initiative; however, the Department had to divert previously committed restricted receipts from the HEZ initiative to the construction of the new health lab in order to mitigate any delay in the project. The Department’s FY2025 budget request states that the diversion of these funds, coupled with the termination of the program’s federal grants, will create an adverse impact on the functionality and sustainability of the HEZ initiative, therefore, the Department requests \$2.7 million in general revenue in FY2025, and \$1.8 million annually through FY2029, to offset the anticipated deficit. The Department has expressed an interest in finding other sources to continue funding the initiative.

Funding by Source	FY2020	FY2021	FY2022	FY2023	FY2024	Total	FY2025 Requested
General Revenue	\$200,000	\$196,711	\$197,768	\$197,767	\$197,767	\$990,013	\$2,747,814
Federal Funds	733,730	8,848,622	7,497,615	4,668,286	4,153,419	\$25,901,672	-
Restricted Receipts	437,077	458,000	450,000	1,224,058	1,224,058	\$3,793,193	-
Other Funds	1,536,802	1,682,390	2,042,837	1,559,192	1,072,305	\$7,893,526	-
RI Foundation Grant	-	-	750,000	250,000	-	\$1,000,000	-
Total	\$2,907,608	\$11,185,723	\$10,938,220	\$7,899,303	\$6,647,549	\$39,578,403	\$2,747,814

Federal Funds: Excluding COVID-19 grants, a majority of HEZ federal funding derives from the Maternal and Child Health Block Grant and the Preventative Health Block Grant. HEZ received a total of \$450,000 from both grants in FY2023 and FY2024. All remaining funds in FY2023 and FY2024 are pandemic related grants.

Prior to FY2020, HEZ utilized funding from numerous grants in which the Department applied for. Funding derived from agencies including, but not limited to, The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services (SAMHSA), the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA), and the Title V Grant. According to the Department, these grants had flexible outcome measures, allowing the Department to braid federal funds from other initiatives into the HEZ program. More recently, federal funding has become more specific on its deliverables regarding community support/health, resulting in increased need in State support in order for the program to have a successful, and equitable impact on Rhode Island’s communities.

Restricted Receipts: The program’s restricted receipts are primarily derived from the Department’s Indirect Cost Recovery restricted receipt account, which can be used to support the Department’s infrastructure needs and emergency critical needs. Revenue in this account is generated by charging a federally approved

⁵ Frieden T. R. (2010). A framework for public health action: the health impact pyramid. American journal of public health, 100(4), 590–595. <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2009.185652>, quoted in RI Department of Health. *Health Equity Zones: A Toolkit for Building Healthy and Resilient Communities*.

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indirect rate on federal grants. These funds are proposed to be diverted from the HEZ program to support the construction of the new health laboratory.

According to the Department, HEZ received an annual allotment of \$500,000 in restricted receipts prior to FY2023. The appropriation was increased to \$1.2 million in FY2023 and FY2024 due to site expansion. HEZ required an additional \$774,058 to ensure the HEZ program remains sustainable. As the RIDOH is experiencing a \$7.0 million deficit due to the construction of the Health Lab, the Department is not planning to allocate any restricted receipts to the HEZ Program.

Other Funds: According to the Department, other funds are primarily smaller federal grants or grants provided by private foundations. Below is a breakdown of other funds awarded to the DOH HEZ initiative. The table below illustrates a breakdown of various grants that the Department’s HEZ initiative received between fiscal years 2020 to 2024.

Other Funds	FY2020	FY2021	FY2022	FY2023	FY2024	Total
HSTP (Participatory Budgeting)	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$54,100	\$854,900	\$909,000
Preschool Development Grant	\$360,170	\$418,456	\$573,569	\$562,661	\$71,297	\$1,986,153
Overdose Data to Action Grant	\$264,697	\$616,435	\$540,091	\$622,614	\$15,000	\$2,058,837
Opioid McKinsey	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$109,208	\$109,208
Environmental Justice(Preventive Health Block Grant)	\$0	\$0		\$50,000	\$21,900	\$71,900
ODMAP Statewide Expansion and Response	\$180,000	\$355,064	\$177,314	\$81,555	\$0	\$793,933
1815 D&HDS (Formula) Heart Disease & Stroke Grant	\$60,000	\$60,000	\$60,000	\$60,000	\$0	\$240,000
Rural Health grant	\$0	\$30,000	\$51,000	\$0	\$0	\$81,000
Testing - non ELC	\$0	\$184,544	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$184,544
Pfizer funding	\$10,000	\$17,892	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$27,892
SOR Grassroots Opioid Campaign	\$573,580	\$0	\$500,000	\$117,858	\$0	\$1,191,439
CDC Planning grant	\$0	\$0	\$50,404	\$10,404	\$0	\$60,808
Opioid stewardship funds	\$0	\$0	\$60,459	\$0	\$0	\$60,459
Green School Yards(Environmental Public Health Tracking Network grant)	\$0	\$0	\$30,000	\$0	\$0	\$30,000
Surge grant	\$88,354	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$88,354
Total Other	\$1,536,802	\$1,682,390	\$2,042,837	\$1,559,192	\$1,072,305	\$7,893,526

The table below further breaks down the annual appropriations by Heath Equity Zone.

Health Equity Zone	Annual Appropriations					Total Per HEZ
	FY2020	FY2021	FY2022	FY2023	FY2024	
*Blackstone Valley Health Equity Zones	-	-	\$150,000	\$200,334	\$222,699	\$573,033
Bristol Health Equity Zone	276,808	244,898	452,493	393,352	359,592	1,727,143
Central Providence Health Equity Zone	339,149	1,888,392	882,389	793,713	1,223,150	5,126,793
East Providence Health Equity Zone	149,998	1,297,552	2,033,518	635,102	487,654	4,603,824
Newport Health Equity Zone	199,551	249,551	452,179	395,875	324,614	1,621,770
OneCraston Health Equity Zone	180,000	830,705	793,306	466,884	419,293	2,690,188
Pawtucket/ Central Falls Health Equity Zone	304,610	2,057,064	1,056,626	1,222,811	1,114,161	5,755,272
*South Providence Health Equity Zone	-	-	150,000	269,879	201,927	621,806
*Tri-County Health Equity Zone	-	666,438	613,388	459,806	323,718	2,063,350
*Warren Health Equity Zone	-	-	150,000	244,755	218,206	612,961
*Warwick Health Equity Zone	-	-	150,000	240,988	184,540	575,528
Washington County Health Equity Zone	254,528	248,232	482,506	383,261	343,668	1,712,195
West Elmwood Health Equity Zone	290,104	1,638,367	1,321,500	775,380	441,289	4,466,640
West Warwick Health Equity Zone	336,173	458,413	613,761	525,445	321,623	2,255,415
Woonsocket Health Equity Zone	576,686	1,606,112	1,636,554	891,719	461,415	5,172,486
Total	\$2,907,607	\$11,185,724	\$10,938,220	\$7,899,304	\$6,647,549	\$39,578,404

Additionally, there has been a total of \$26.3 million expended throughout the past four fiscal years. A majority of these expenditures has been allocated to the COVID-19 mitigation and community recovery.

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Health Equity Zone	Annual Expenditures				Total Per HEZ
	FY2020	FY2021	FY2022	FY2023	
*Blackstone Valley Health Equity Zones	-	-	\$113,055	\$84,107	\$197,162
Bristol Health Equity Zone	269,487	225,370	266,692	357,738	1,119,287
Central Providence Health Equity Zone	276,229	897,609	801,824	733,039	2,708,701
East Providence Health Equity Zone	113,048	745,216	1,487,501	473,337	2,819,102
Newport Health Equity Zone	199,549	249,551	428,995	376,912	1,255,007
OneCranston Health Equity Zone	128,243	645,082	549,969	444,913	1,768,207
Pawtucket/ Central Falls Health Equity Zone	277,986	1,982,292	892,158	1,098,450	4,250,886
*South Providence Health Equity Zone	-	-	149,583	261,362	410,945
*Tri-County Health Equity Zone	-	317,704	611,448	446,006	1,375,158
*Warren Health Equity Zone	-	-	108,042	208,509	316,551
*Warwick Health Equity Zone	-	-	110,494	174,091	284,585
Washington County Health Equity Zone	254,363	228,232	454,275	261,223	1,198,093
West Elmwood Health Equity Zone	154,961	1,438,965	1,094,951	534,254	3,223,131
West Warwick Health Equity Zone	305,073	356,362	486,332	458,944	1,606,711
Woonsocket Health Equity Zone	290,141	1,328,944	1,361,647	753,342	3,734,074
Total	\$2,269,080	\$8,415,327	\$8,916,966	\$6,666,227	\$26,267,600

* Second Cohort

Generalized Outcomes:

According to the Department, since the implementation of the Health Equity Zone initiative, each community has experienced outcomes that helped heal community trauma. The most common outcomes observed includes a decrease of substance abuse, an increase of community engagement among youth and adult residents, increased economic opportunities, and increased access to nutrient dense foods.

In 2021, the HEZ initiative expanded, adding six new Zones to HEZ. Since 2021, these zones have identified the trauma that inhibits the community from growing and maintaining healthy lifestyles, while simultaneously mitigating the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. While these newer zones have fewer outcomes as their predecessors, all six of the HEZ zones have identified community-specific social determinants of health, and have created an action plan to better support the residents of these communities.

According to the Department, the HEZ model is gaining national recognition as an emerging best practice in delivering community and public health services. Numerous municipalities have implemented models similar or identical to HEZ, including Washington State, Chicago, Tallahassee, and Birmingham. Additionally, the Department of Health has engaged with [Accountable Communities for Health](#) (ACH), an alliance of health care, public health, and other organizations, to develop a similar structure to aid in Medicaid transformation⁶ - an initiative that seeks to improve the delivery of Medicaid services. RIDOH and the HEZ Initiative have also provided one on one technical assistance to the Association of State and Territorial Health Officials (ASTHO), which implemented the ASTHO Challenge, which encourages States to build healthy communities by investing in “community driven, place based, cross-sector approaches”⁷. The ASTHO Challenge was developed directly from the HEZ model.

The Department has expressed difficulty in maintaining consistent and complete data regarding outcomes related to Rhode Island’s local HEZ program, mostly due to lack of funding to support the current evaluation

⁶ Marple, K. (2022, August 3). *Organizing Health Equity Work By Place*. Retrieved from healthbegins.org: <https://healthbegins.org/organizing-health-equity-work-by-place/#:~:text=This%20model%2C%20adapted%20by%20HealthBegins,with%20a%20coordinated%20set%20of>

⁷ ASSOCIATION OF STATE AND TERRITORIAL HEALTH OFFICIALS. (n.d.). ASTHO Challenge. Retrieved from astho.org.

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model, and nature of the project, and the impact's of COVID-19. However, the Department tracks each investment according to the requirements of the associated funding goals. Currently, HEZ programs monitor milestones rather than outcomes, as milestones are more practical to track and manage performance. The Department believes that tracking milestones will lead to programmatic improvements through indicators such as population outcomes.

Below are HEZ specific details regarding community priorities, their action plans, and reported outcomes.

Rhode Island Health Equity Zones, Community Focus, and Action Plans:***Bristol Health Equity Zone (Est. 2015)******FY2024: \$359,592***

- **Total Funding to Date:** \$1.7 million
- **Backbone Agency:** East Bay Community Action Program
- **Community Priorities:** Food Security and Nutrition, Mental Health, Physical Activity, Substance Use, Tobacco Control
- **Action Plan:** Monthly Food and Nutrition Work Group, Tobacco Control Policy, and Safe Stations
- **Outcomes:**
 - Bristol's Monthly Food and Nutrition Group promotes nutrition education and organizes monthly cooking demonstrations. It has reached 3,594 and has delivered 11,520 meals to residents.
 - The HEZ has helped pass an ordinance prohibiting smoking in town parks.

Blackstone Valley Health Equity Zone (Est. 2021)***FY2024: \$222,699***

- **Total Funding to Date:** \$573,033
- **Backbone Agency:** Blackstone Valley Advocacy Center
- **Community Priorities:** Community Trauma, Environmental Health, Housing, Mental Health
- **Action Plan:** Interviews and focus groups with residents to share their experience race and socioeconomic based discrimination, addressing lack of affordable housing, and provide clean water to residents of the Stamina Mill neighborhood in North Smithfield.
- **Outcomes:**
 - Blackstone Valley HEZ has identified numerous socioeconomic factors related to the community's poor health outcomes through surveys and focus groups. Residents have shared their experience with race and socioeconomic based discrimination.

Central Providence Health Equity Zone (Est. 2015)***FY2024: \$1.2 million***

- **Total Funding to Date:** \$5.1 million
- **Backbone Agency:** ONE Neighborhood Builders
- **Community Priorities:** Civic Engagement, Education, Housing, Healthcare Access
- **Action Plan:** Improving economic opportunity among residents of the 02908 and 02909 zip codes ([Central Providence Opportunities](#)), youth leadership program ([Planting Seeds](#)), and the [Community Health Worker pre-apprenticeship program](#)

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- **Outcomes:**

- 24 residents enrolled in the Community Health Worker pre-apprenticeship program
- Increased youth engagement regarding community organizing and environmental justice

One Cranston Health Equity Zone (Est. 2019)***FY2024: \$419,293***

- **Total Funding to Date:** \$2.7 million
- **Backbone Agency:** Comprehensive Community Action Program
- **Community Priorities:** Civic Engagement, Community Trauma, Environmental Health, Food Security and Nutrition, Healthcare Access
- **Action Plan:** A new family support center used to improve child and adolescent behavioral health, provide wrap around services, and plan events for families with children (the Huddle Center), increasing food security through weekly farmers markets, and providing produce deliveries to households.
- **Outcomes:**
 - 700 bags of produce delivered to households

East Providence Health Equity Zone (Est. 2019)***FY2024: \$487,556***

- **Total Funding to Date:** \$4.6 million
- **Backbone Agency:** East Bay Community Action Program
- **Community Priorities:** Food Security and Nutrition, Healthcare Access, Housing, Mental Health
- **Action Plan:** Benefits application assistance, food deliveries, creating an assessment on oral health access in East Providence, and collaborating with mental health providers to address mental health issues among East Providence's senior population.
- **Outcomes:**
 - Food Delivered to 29 residents

Newport Health Equity Zone (Est. 2015)***FY2024: \$324,614***

- **Total Funding to Date:** \$1.6 million
- **Backbone Agency:** Women's Resource Center
- **Community Priorities:** Civic Engagement, Education, Environmental Health, Food Security, Healthcare Access, Housing, Mental Health
- **Action Plan:** Partnering with Smart Growth America (SGA) to develop a plan centered on supporting north end residents to address inequity, food insecurity, and housing insecurity; implementing green and complete streets, implementing green public spaces, housing advocacy, coordinating farmers markets, and compiling a food justice assessment.

Pawtucket/Central Falls Health Equity Zone: (Est. 2015)***FY2024: \$1.1 million***

- **Total Funding to Date:** \$5.8 million
- **Backbone Agency:** Local Initiatives Support Corporation

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- **Community Priorities:** Behavioral Health, Education, Environmental Health, Food Security, Housing, Community Trauma
- **Action Plan:** Reducing lead poisoning, implementing green and complete streets, advocating for equitable housing through community engagement, improving food and nutrition through community led taskforce, centering the voices of young people through a youth engagement taskforce.
- **Outcomes:**
 - Decreased childhood lead poisoning by 44.0 percent
 - Completed the first green and complete street ordinance
 - 27 residents are actively advocating for housing equity
 - 46 young people participate in the youth engagement task force which recently held a town hall on the Budgetary Process that had over 80 teens in attendance.

South Providence Health Equity Zone (Est. 2021)**FY2024: \$201,927**

- **Total Funding to Date:** \$621,806
- **Backbone Agency:** Family Service of Rhode Island
- **Community Priorities:** Childcare, Health Literacy, Housing, Food Security, Transportation
- **Action Plan:** Benefits Application Assistance, deliveries of nutrient dense foods, community vaccination clinics, and tree planting
- **Outcomes:**
 - Planted over 20 trees in the 02905 area
 - Supported 15 community vaccination clinics offering COVID-19, influenza, TdAP, Shingles, and hepatitis vaccines.

Washington County Health Equity Zone (Est. 2015)**FY2024: \$343,668**

- **Total Funding to Date:** \$1.7 million
- **Backbone Agency:** Woodriver Health
- **Community Priorities:** Mental Health, Food Security, Physical Activity
- **Action Plan:** Implementing Mental Health First Aid training to prevent suicide
- **Outcomes:**
 - Over 1,000 police officers, clergy, teachers, parents, and staff were trained to screen patients for depression.

Tri- County Health Equity Zone (Est. 2019)**FY2024: \$323,718**

- **Total Funding to Date:** \$2.0 million
- **Backbone Agency:** Tri-County Community Action Program
- **Community Priorities:** Environmental Health, Food Security, Housing, Mental Health

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- **Action Plan:** Early childhood development education and support programs for parents and caregivers, completing in-depth needs assessments to understand residents' challenges and identified common issues such as food access, affordable housing, and employment challenges.
- **Outcomes:**
 - Just completed an in-depth needs assessment in North Providence, Smithfield, and Johnston, and identified common issues such as decreased food access, increased unemployment, lack of affordable housing, lack of transportation, and a need for better afterschool programs.

Warren Health Equity Zone (Est. 2021)**FY2024: \$218,206**

- **Total Spending to Date:** \$612,961
- **Backbone Agency:** East Bay Community Action Program
- **Community Priorities:** Environmental Health, Food Security, Healthcare Access, Housing, Mental Health, Substance Use, Transportation
- **Action Plan:** Safety and resiliency projects that engages with residents and improves transportation and climate anxiety. Navigation support, and justice equity among non-violent offenders.
- **Outcomes:**
 - Administered \$250,000 to maintain and develop low income housing

Warwick Health Equity Zone (Est. 2021)**FY2024: \$184,540**

- **Total Spending to Date:** \$575,528
- **Backbone Agency:** Comprehensive Community Action Program
- **Community Priorities:** Food Security, Healthcare Access, Mental Health, Transportation
- **Action Plan:** Increasing access to fresh and nutrition foods, and creating access to physical and mental healthcare to residents of the NYLO Hotel.
- **Outcomes:**
 - Delivered 3,800 meals to families in 2022

West Elmwood Health Equity Zone (Est. 2021)**FY2024: \$441,289**

- **Total Spending to Date:** \$4.5 million
- **Backbone Agency:** West Elmwood Housing Development Corporation
- **Community Priorities:** Environmental Health, Housing, Food Security, Behavioral Health
- **Action Plan:** Identify challenges related to substance abuse, increase access to nutrient dense foods, and conduct a social determinant of health needs (SDOH) assessment for willing participants.
- **Outcomes:**
 - 2 Community advocates conducted a social determinants of health screening for 28 residents, 25 of which received home visits.

*RHODE ISLAND HEALTH EQUITY ZONE (HEZ) INITIATIVE***West Warwick Health Equity Zone (Est. 2015)****FY2024: \$321,623**

- **Total Spending to Date:** \$2.3 million
- **Backbone Agency:** Thundermist Health Center
- **Community Priorities:** Environmental Health, Food Access, Housing, Mental Health, Substance Use, Transportation
- **Action Plan:** Developing quality, and affordable housing, improving access to women’s shelters, healthcare, and behavioral health services; addressing the opioid crisis through increased access to Naloxone, increasing access to nutrient dense foods, and increasing access to mental and behavioral health.
- **Outcome:**
 - Improved access to healthcare and behavioral health services.

Woonsocket Health Equity Zone (Est. 2015)**FY2024: \$461,415**

- **Total Spending to Date:** \$5.2 million
- **Backbone Agency:** Thundermist Health Center
- **Community Priorities:** Food Security and Nutrition, Substance Use, Sexual and Reproductive Health, Violence Prevention
- **Action Plan:** Sexual and reproductive health education by connecting students with resources and implementing an inclusive curriculum, increasing access to nutrient dense foods, overdose prevention, resident ambassadors that identify issues among the community, and implementation of evidence-based programming for children and families that prevent abuse, neglect, and youth violence.
- **Outcomes:**
 - Educated over 700 middle school students on healthy relationships and community resources through evidence-based teaching.
 - Developed the three R’s curriculum (Youth’s Rights, Respect, and Responsibilities)
 - Educated 100 percent of first- and second-year high school students received 250 hours of the three R’s curriculum
 - 32 youth have participated in violence and abuse prevention.
 - 50.0 percent decrease in overdose deaths between 2017 and 2018

HEZ and COVID-19:

Throughout the Pandemic, Health Equity Zones played an integral role in COVID-19 mitigation. Through community engagement and consistent assurance, HEZ sites, along with the backbone agencies, could better spread the message of the importance of vaccinations, wearing masks, quarantining, and any other mitigation technique recommended by the CDC and the Department of Health. Following are the activities taken by HEZ to aid in COVID-19 mitigation and recovery:

- 4.2 million masks distributed
- 119,200 requests for COVID-19 information and support
- 426,239 Rhode Island residents reached

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- 369,179 educational materials delivered
- 253,964 Rhode Island residents served by Community Health Workers
- 200 Staff working on outreach
- 196,910 residents reached through vaccine related outreach
- 30,241 individuals assisted with COVID-19 vaccine registration
- 206,958 individuals tested at community test sites.
- 842,098 meals distributed
- 328,115 self-test kits distributed
- 25,110 vaccines administered.

**Data retrieved from the Rhode Island Department of Health. (2023). RI Health Equity Zones COVID-19 Response - Updates through April 14, 2023.*