

Testimony of Heather Croteau
SEIU Local 580
FY2027 Budget – Department of Human Services

Dear Chairperson and Members of the Senate Finance Committee:

Good afternoon, Chair and members of the committee. My name is Heather Croteau. I am testifying on behalf of SEIU Local 580 regarding the FY2027 budget for the Department of Human Services.

Our members support Medicaid, SNAP, childcare assistance, and other essential programs. We work directly with the systems that determine whether Rhode Islanders can access basic needs.

We see how these systems function not just on paper, but in practice—where policy decisions translate directly into whether families can access food, healthcare, and stability.

We sit across from families every day who are trying to keep their housing, feed their children, and stay connected to healthcare. When these systems work, families stabilize. When they don't, the consequences are immediate and often severe.

The concerns I am raising today reflect what we are seeing in real time when systems are strained, delayed, or under-resourced.

We also recognize that this budget reflects difficult choices in a constrained fiscal environment, and we appreciate the continued investment in critical programs. The issue we are raising is not whether these programs are important—but whether the operational capacity exists to deliver them effectively.

We are also hearing consistently from staff across offices about staffing shortages, delays in service delivery, and increasing gaps between policy expectations and day-to-day operations.

Eligibility Supervisory Capacity

The budget increases workload across eligibility programs, particularly with new federal requirements, but does not clearly address supervisory capacity.

Supervisors are essential to ensuring accuracy, consistency, and support for frontline staff managing complex cases. Without sufficient capacity, errors increase, decisions become inconsistent, and workers have less support to get it right.

For families, that means delays, confusion, and barriers to accessing services.

The Committee should require a clear plan for supervisory staffing and ratios.

SNAP Administration and System Capacity

New verification requirements, error reduction efforts, and redeterminations are increasing workload and complexity across the system.

We support program integrity—but not at the expense of access. Maintaining strong program integrity efforts requires adequate staffing, training, and system support to ensure both accuracy and timely access to benefits.

These changes are not small adjustments—they fundamentally increase the administrative burden on both workers and families.

Without aligning staffing, workload, and system performance, the result is predictable: delays, improper closures, and increased federal risk.

In one office, staff reported serving more than 6,000 clients each month while significantly short-staffed, with clients waiting hours in lobbies or on hold just to access basic assistance.

Other units report long-standing vacancies and delays in hiring, with remaining staff absorbing additional workload without relief.

We are also hearing from specialized eligibility units that long-standing system issues remain unresolved. Staff report business process requests to correct eligibility errors sitting in the system for years—some dating back to 2018—resulting in incorrect closures, delayed benefits, and ongoing reliance on manual workarounds.

These are known system issues without a clear path to resolution, creating ongoing risk for both families and the Department.

Staff also report a lack of formal training for specialized roles, forcing workers to learn complex systems through trial and error. At the same time, critical institutional knowledge is concentrated in a small number of experienced staff approaching retirement, with no clear plan to preserve that expertise.

Frontline staff are often the point of contact for system issues they do not control, absorbing frustration from clients while lacking the tools needed to resolve problems efficiently.

Structural Medicaid Financing

The state has identified a growing Medicaid financing gap without a defined long-term strategy.

Without a plan, those costs will be absorbed by services, providers, and the families who rely on them.

Conclusion

Across DHS, we are seeing a consistent pattern: vacancies, limited training for specialized roles, unresolved system issues, and increasing reliance on staff to absorb system gaps without corresponding support.

This is about aligning policy decisions with operational reality.

Continued investment is critical—but without corresponding attention to staffing, training, and system functionality, those investments will not fully translate into improved outcomes for families.

Right now, that gap is being absorbed by staff—and by the families who can least afford it.

When systems are under strain, families feel it first—and hardest.

Thank you for your time and consideration.