

## JOCELYN P. ANTONIO, MPH

### Testimony on S-2667, Rhode Island Childcare is Essential Act

Senate Finance Committee

May 5, 2026

Good afternoon, Chairperson DiPalma and members of the Senate Finance Committee. My name is **Jocelyn Antonio**. I am a resident of the town of Cumberland and a public health professional offering this testimony in my personal capacity.

I strongly urge your support for **S-2667 – An Act Relating to Human Services – Rhode Island Childcare is Essential Act**, sponsored by Senator Vargas and co-sponsored by Senators DiMario, Urso, Murray, and DiPalma.

This legislation would expand eligibility for the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) to meet national best practices, strengthen provider payment policies, and modernize reimbursement rates, especially for infant care. It also provides a “good cause” exception for child support cooperation requirements that can be harmful to survivors of domestic violence. Collectively, these changes would build a more equitable and stable childcare system across Rhode Island.

#### **Public Health Implications of Accessible Childcare**

According to the **American Public Health Association**, **education access and quality is a core social influencer of health** - a non-medical factor that significantly impacts **health outcomes**. Educational attainment is the **single greatest predictor of a person’s health and well-being across the life span** [1], [2]. Quality **early childcare** plays a **critical role in health and development, supporting learning, behavior, and social-emotional skills**, while also supporting **long-term mental and physical health**.

Numerous studies have shown that access to **high-quality, affordable childcare is associated with:**

- Improved school readiness and academic achievement [3], [4], [5], [6]
- Increased parental workforce participation and economic mobility [5], [7]
- Reduced behavioral and emotional challenges for children
- Improved maternal mental health and family well-being

#### **Maternal Health and the Child Care Crisis**

The **United States is facing a maternal health crisis**, despite spending **more per capita on maternal health than any other country** [8]. The U.S. has the **highest rate of maternal deaths among high-income nations**, and these disparities disproportionately impact **Black and Indigenous women** [9]. Access to **affordable, high-quality childcare is a crucial component of postpartum support**.

Research has found that:

- **Access to childcare** helps protect mothers from experiencing depressive symptoms.
- **Reliable childcare reduces** the impact of sleep deprivation, lowering the risk of maternal depression [10], [11].

- **Children in high-quality childcare are less likely to experience the negative emotional and behavioral effects** of maternal mental health disorders and other challenging family circumstances [12], [13], [14].

Yet, **childcare access remains deeply unequal**. Data indicates that **57.3% of Latino/Hispanic families live in childcare deserts—a disproportionately higher rate** than the general population (50.5%). Combined with **higher maternal mental health disorders in Latino/Hispanic** communities (40%), this underscores why passing Senate Bill 2667 is essential for public health and racial equity [15].

### **Alignment with Federal Standards**

Senate Bill 2667 brings Rhode Island in line with the national best practices. By expanding eligibility and setting the entry limit at 85% of the State Median Income (SMI) and allowing families to retain assistance until reaching 100% of SMI, Rhode Island would join at least 17 states in the country—including many of our New England neighbors – in meeting or exceeding the federal benchmark. This also eliminates the “benefits cliff” that punishes families for modest wage increases. Additionally, the bill ensures family co-payments do not exceed 7% of their income, meeting the federal guideline for affordability.

This bill ensures compliance with updated **federal equal access standards, modernizes payment practices, and increases infant care reimbursement rates by 30%** compared to toddler care—helping stabilize a workforce that is predominantly women and women of color.

### **Conclusion**

Senate Bill 2667 is an **essential, equity-driven and long overdue investment** that prioritizes the **well-being of Rhode Island’s children**, families, and economy. **S-2667 is not just a human services bill—it is a public health bill.**

This legislation:

- Expands family eligibility to federal benchmarks
- Removes child support enforcement as a barrier to safety and care
- Establishes tiered reimbursement rates to sustain quality providers
- Invests in the health and retention of the childcare workforce

I urge the committee to support and pass this critical legislation.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

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