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Testimony Re: Senate Bill 2828 – The Rhode Island Works Program
Senate Finance Committee

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Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today. Rhode Island KIDS COUNT would like to voice its strong support for Senate Bill 2828 and thank Senator Murray for sponsoring this bill and Senators Acosta, Bissailon, Gu, DiPalma, Thompson, LaMountain, Bell, Pearson, and Felag for co-sponsoring. This legislation seeks to make several improvements to the Rhode Island Works Program. These improvements would include:

- Increasing the monthly cash benefit to 100% of the federal poverty level and providing annual cost-of-living adjustments, so benefits don't lose value through inflation.
- Raising the amount of child support that goes directly to families to \$100 for one child and \$200 for families with two or more children
- Eliminating the waiting period for lawful permanent residents to receive benefits
- Eliminating the \$65 benefit reduction for families living in subsidized housing.

The Rhode Island Works Program

The Rhode Island Works (RI Works) Program assists very low-income families in meeting their basic needs through various forms of support, including cash assistance, employment services, food assistance, health insurance, and subsidized child care. In December 2025, there were 2,572 adults and **5,932 children under age 18 enrolled in RI Works. Seventy percent of RI Works beneficiaries were children, and 38% of the children enrolled in RI Works were under the age of six.** Senate Bill 2828 would strengthen the current program through targeted policies that will improve the economic security of families and support children with the greatest need.

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT is the co-lead convener of the Raising RI Coalition, a group of 60 advocacy, faith-based, health care, and social service organizations dedicated to lifting children out of poverty by increasing the RI Works benefit and breaking the cycle of poverty by providing parents with education and training opportunities that lead to well-paying, secure jobs. Coalition members include the Economic Progress Institute, Rhode Island AFL-CIO, The Rhode Island Interfaith Coalition to Reduce Poverty, the Right from the Start Campaign, United Way of Rhode Island, The Rhode Island Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics, The Rhode Island Coalition Against Domestic Violence, and many more.

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We thank the General Assembly for the significant reforms it has made over the past few years to improve the lives of families enrolled in RI Works, including two benefit increases after 30 years of stagnant benefits. These improvements have made a difference in the lives of Rhode Island families; however, additional reforms are needed to ensure that Rhode Island children and families living in deep poverty get the support they need to live healthy lives.

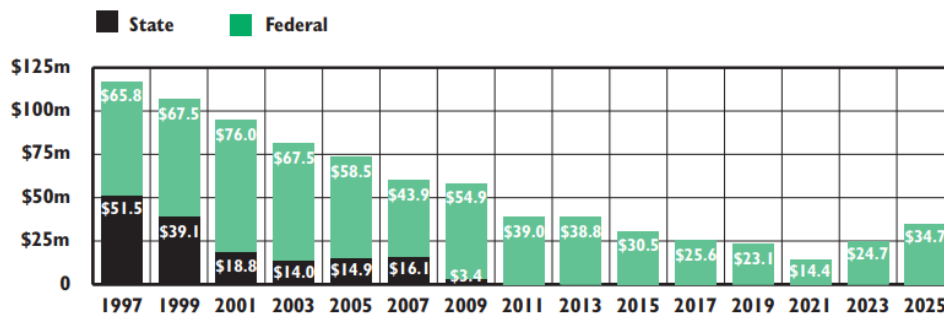
We urge the General Assembly to make the following improvements to the program.

- Protect Rhode Island children and families from deep poverty and the effects of inflation:** In 2024, the benefit was increased for the second time after 30 years without benefit increases, increasing the benefit from 40% to 41% of the federal poverty level (FPL). This was an improvement, but still left children living in extreme poverty, a circumstance that not only impacts their immediate health and well-being, but also their behavioral, educational, and social outcomes and has long-term consequences for their success in life. **And due to inflation, the benefit amount is back to just 40% of the FPL.**

We urge the General Assembly to increase the benefit to 100% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL) and include a cost-of-living adjustment so it keeps pace with changes in the FPL. Currently, the benefit is only \$865 per month for a family of three. **This increase can be funded using the federal TANF block grant and would not require any additional state dollars.**



Rhode Island Cash Assistance Expenditures, State Fiscal Years 1996-2025



- Increase the child support pass-through:** In Rhode Island, only the first \$50 of child support payments goes directly to the custodial parent receiving RI Works assistance; **the rest is kept by the state and federal government** to reimburse itself for providing benefits. **The state does not currently contribute any general revenue to support the RI Works program.**

Child support is a vital resource for low-income families and plays a key role in reducing child poverty. For children in single-parent households, these payments can significantly improve financial stability, sometimes nearly doubling the income of those living in poverty. Under federal guidelines, states have the flexibility to pass through up to \$100 for one child and \$200 for two or more children to families each month without penalty. States can count the portion of child support passed through and disregarded for families receiving assistance toward their TANF maintenance of effort obligations. In Maryland, New Mexico, New York, Pennsylvania, West Virginia, for example, families

receive up to \$100 for one child and up to \$200 for two or more children through the pass-through policy.

During Federal Fiscal Year 2025, Rhode Island collected \$1.7 million in child support for custodial parents who received RI Works benefits at any point during the year, yet only \$444,884 was distributed to families, with an average of 384 families receiving a monthly pass-through payment. Increasing the pass-through to \$100 for one child and \$200 for two or more children would have directed an additional \$594,800 in support to families. Based on Rhode Island's Federal Medical Assistance Percentage (FMAP) of approximately 56% for FY2025, this increase would result in roughly \$335,000 covered by the federal government and about \$260,000 in state general revenue. **While this means approximately \$260,000 would no longer flow into general revenue, it would instead leverage federal funding to deliver nearly \$594,800 directly to the state's neediest families, strengthening their financial stability and well-being.**

- **Support the well-being of immigrant families:** In 1996, along with 'welfare reform' that led to enactment of TANF, Congress put in place restrictions on public benefit programs for immigrants who were lawfully living in the U.S., including prohibiting lawful permanent residents (LPRs), people with green cards, from receiving SNAP, Medicaid, and TANF until they had been in this status for five years. When Rhode Island enacted the Family Independence Program (FIP), LPR families were eligible for assistance if they met program rules, without a five-year wait. The state used general revenue to provide assistance. When FIP was replaced by RI Works in 2007, the state instituted a five-year waiting period for LPR families to save general revenue.

These families live, work, pay taxes, and raise children in Rhode Island, yet are blocked from programs meant to help them gain skills and secure stable employment. This bill would remove the five-year waiting period, so families can get job training and other work supports sooner, strengthen their economic stability, and better support their children. Thirteen states including Maryland, Georgia, Wisconsin, Connecticut, and New York already allow income-eligible families with lawful permanent residency to access these benefits without a waiting period. Rhode Island can do the same using state funds and strengthen our workforce and invest in families' long-term stability.

- **Eliminate the \$65 Reduction for Families in Subsidized Housing:** Rhode Island reduces the RI Works benefit by \$65 for families living in subsidized housing, even though these families are already low-income and the cost of living continues to rise. Eliminating this reduction would allow families to use that money for essentials like baby formula, medication, or transportation to work and medical appointments. As of February, there were 805 RI Works cases identified as having a rent subsidy, and using this estimate, the \$65 monthly deduction results in approximately **\$627,900 annually being withheld from families. Because this funding is drawn from monthly cash benefits within the TANF block grant, it does not represent new spending** but rather reflects a policy choice about whether families receive the full amount of assistance for which they already qualify.

In recent years, the General Assembly and the Governor have made housing a priority for our state. This policy aligns with that priority by helping families avoid unnecessary crises and remain in their homes.

Rhode Island currently receives \$95 million in federal funds through the TANF block grant. In FY 2023, Rhode Island spent [\\$15 million or 9%](#) of the total TANF spending on basic cash assistance. TANF block grants are meant to be spent on basic assistance, so we have room to grow in this area and use more of these funds for its primary purpose – supporting our poorest children and families. We can make critical changes to the RI Works program by investing more federal TANF funds in direct assistance for the 3,325 families in this program.

We can make even more of a difference if we invest state funds in our most vulnerable children and families. We encourage the General Assembly to support the proposed improvements to the Rhode Island Works program. These changes have long been needed and are essential for improving families' current economic security and the future success of our children.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify today.

