

Senate Committee on Health and Human Services

March 23, 2026

Support for S3056

Dear Chair Murray and Vice Chair Lauria,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments regarding this important legislation (and thank you Senator Murray for introducing).

I am an Advance Practice Public Health Nurse board certified in Psychiatric and Mental Health Nursing and have been active in program administration and advocacy at the intersection of aging, disability, long-term care, and behavioral healthcare for many years. I serve on the Governor's Council on Aging, the Governor's Council on Behavioral Healthcare, RI's Elder Mental Health and Addiction Coalition, and lead the Long-Term Care Coordinating Council's Behavioral Health Sub-Committee and RI's Alzheimer's Council.

We know that gaps in our existing continuum of care lead to longer, more frequent, even unnecessary stays in institutional and acute care settings for many Rhode Islanders and especially for older adults and adults with disabilities. Recent state sponsored system evaluations have indicated the need for hospital diversion and specialized nursing facility programs to decrease the reliance on high-cost acute hospitalizations (RI Behavioral Health System Review - July 2021, HealthCare System Planning Foundational Report -December 2024, RI's Olmstead Plan 2025-2030 - February 2025 and Long Term Care Coordinating Council Annual Report - March 2025, RI Brain injury Services Redesign Study -June 2025). In particular, the RI BH System Review noted: "Of those LTSS eligible individuals with a BH diagnosis, about half (49%) are receiving institutional services (either in a nursing home or public hospital), suggesting an opportunity to rebalance toward less-restrictive, lower-cost community-based settings."

Our partners at our local hospitals (both acute hospitals and Eleanor Slater Hospital) identify people who would be best cared for in a nursing facility in their community but instead stay for sometimes months within a hospital due to lack of appropriate community placement. And our nursing home partners need support to ensure that residents with behavioral health needs have access to the behavioral health care they need. RI's robust community behavioral health system faces limitations such that comprehensive behavioral health care does not extend to residents living in a nursing facility.

In 2023 RI passed legislation to allow for Specialized Skilled Nursing Facility Behavioral Health Units. Unfortunately, regulatory requirements were instituted which effectively built barriers to implementation and to date no facilities have been licensed to serve this population. Stakeholders have been collaborating with RI Executive Office of Human Services on solutions, and this bill represents the opportunity for our partners at EOHHS and Department of Behavioral Healthcare Developmental Disabilities and Hospitals to seek Centers for Medicare and Medicaid approval for changes in program requirements that would facilitate implementation.

Passing this legislation will be a step towards building a level of care that will allow some of our most vulnerable Rhode Islanders who need long term nursing care and behavioral healthcare to be cared for in their communities.

Thank you,
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