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May 7, 2024

Representative Marvin L. Abney, Chair  
House Finance Committee  
Rhode Island State House  
Providence, Rhode Island 02908

RE: Testimony in Support of House Bill 7123, An Act Relating to Human Services – The Rhode Island Works Program

United Way of Rhode Island (UWRI) is writing to express its support for House Bill 7123. Paying for child care is a major barrier to economic stability for many young families, especially families with parents working minimum wage jobs. The impacts of poverty are the worst for the youngest; health, education, and social development outcomes all depend heavily on the care received during childhood. Improving child care on a statewide scale begins with supporting the early childhood workforce: young families in Rhode Island benefit when the daycares and preschools are consistently staffed by quality educators. Senate Bill 2344 secures the victories of the original funding for child care educators and expands to include critical early intervention service.

UWRI works in collaboration with workforce development and adult education nonprofits to promote economic empowerment. When we look at the need to increase incomes in Rhode Island, specific populations emerge from the data as highest risk for economic instability. Child care providers employ more Latina women and women of color, and child care wages are low and decreasing. Supporting early childhood educators is an equity issue. Child care providers are under immense pressure to keep costs low for Rhode Island's working families, who are also under pressure from inflation and stagnant wages. The state's intervention in the child care industry should continue to focus on the early childhood educators that staff these facilities that are critical to the function of the Rhode Island economy, and this program is so perfectly tailored to support the workers first.

Workforce Alliance, of which UWRI is a leading member, is a partnership among adult education workforce training providers, business, labor, philanthropic organizations, and community leaders. Every month, state partners report updates to the community about programs, and earlier this year we heard an update about this program in particular. What struck me as especially interesting was the success the program had in its applications process: early childhood educators were easily able to apply for and access this program without having to navigate the long DHS application for the RI Childcare Assistance Program.

This fact resonated so deeply with the experience of Rhode Islanders who call 211, UWRI's social service hotline asking for help navigating that long DHS application. After struggling online, calling the DHS office and waiting hours to speak to a representative, many folks simply

Uniting our community and resources to build racial equity and opportunities for all Rhode Islanders.





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give up on their applications. If they're aware of the 211 service, UWRI can connect them to local navigators to advocate for them, but the application system remains an enormous barrier to accessing the programs designed to help. This program's pilot proves that a better application system is possible and necessary to improving access to poverty-relieving programs. By continuing to fund this program, we can learn to build applications that meet Rhode Islanders where they are.

Please consider the continuation of this program as an opportunity to support the child care workers on whom the Rhode Island economy depends. Investment in this industry directly impacts the quality of the care that our youngest children receive at a critical time in their development. Rhode Island has already benefitted from this program, please allow the benefits to multiply as the program reaches more early childhood educators where they are.

Very best,  
Peggy Desjarlais  
Program Officer, Housing and Economic Development Policy

