



RHODE ISLAND KIDS COUNT
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Testimony Re: H-7404, The RI Works Program (Creates separate statute for the RI Child Care Assistance Program)

House Finance Committee

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Rhode Island KIDS COUNT strongly supports Representative Julie Casimiro's bill, H-7404, which is proposed by the RI Department of Human Services and would create a new statute for child care separate from RI Works cash assistance. The proposal to create a new child care statute separate from RI Works is also part of Rep. Diaz's *Child Care is Essential* bill.

Families across the state are struggling to find and pay for quality child care so they can work, and child care programs are struggling to offer competitive wages so they can find and keep skilled educators.

Nine out of ten families in the state cannot afford the cost of child care. Rhode Island has the lowest family income limit in the northeast for child care assistance and has cut \$46 million in state General Revenue from the Child Care Assistance Program. Child care programs across the state struggle to attract, develop, and retain a skilled workforce because resources are not sufficient to pay competitive wages. We have struggled for many years to meet federal benchmarks in the Child Care Development Block Grant.

Rhode Island needs to disentangle Child Care Assistance from the RI Works program. Three out of four child care subsidies in Rhode Island are used by low-income working families not receiving cash assistance.

Almost 10% of subsidies are used to pay for child care for children in foster care since there are extremely few foster parents who could accept a child and pay for the cost of child care out of their pockets. And the foster care payment they receive from DCYF comes nowhere near to meeting the cost of child care or to provide financial security to non-working parents. We want foster parents to be financially secure because we know that financial security is important for children's health and well-being, particularly when they are experiencing a traumatic separation. So, we want financially secure working parents to be able to accept foster children and have access to very high-quality free child care.

It would be helpful to consolidate statutory language about family eligibility, provider rates, and initiatives that support access to high-quality early care and education that many children receive through enrollment in child care. We would suggest calling it the *Child Care is Essential Act*.

Thank you for this opportunity to provide testimony.