



RHODE ISLAND KIDS COUNT
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Testimony Re: H-7547, Child Care for All Act
House Finance Committee
May 9, 2024
Leanne Barrett, Senior Policy Analyst

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT **strongly supports Representative Cherie Cruz's Child Care for All Act, H-7547** which is a visionary bill that would establish the infrastructure, systems, and expansion timeline needed to ensure that every family in the state has access to affordable, reliable, quality child care from infancy through age 12 and high-quality publicly funded preschool for children ages 3 and 4.

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.

Rhode Island currently has the lowest family income limit for child care assistance in the northeastern United States. We have cut \$46-\$48 million in state general revenue from the Child Care Assistance Program since 2005. The statewide labor shortage, particularly in female dominated fields, is likely because families cannot afford the cost of child care without a subsidy. Using the federal affordability standard, families need to earn at least \$197,000/year to pay the average cost of care for one infant enrolled in an average center that pays staff close to minimum wage.

This bill would also ensure that funding amounts are sufficient to pay competitive wages to attract, develop, and retain skilled educators in child care and in preschool programs. As you may know, even though our RI Pre-K program is ranked among the highest quality in the nation, we are underfunding it, which has created a \$25,000 - \$30,000 wage gap between Pre-K teachers and similarly qualified kindergarten teachers. We also have similar disparities in funding and significant wage gaps for Early Head Start and Head Start teachers which has led to closed classrooms (due to lack of staff willing to work at wages offered) and long waiting lists.

Thank you for this opportunity to provide testimony. We applaud Representative Cruz's leadership in bringing this bill forward.