

May 1, 2024

RE: Support for H-8079 and H-8078

To Chairman Abney and Members of the House Finance Committee:

Our state is experiencing a current and projected workforce shortage in many critical areas of health care including primary care, behavioral health care and nursing care. The shortage reduces access to preventive services, threatens the quality of care, and contributes to increased costs, factors that will exacerbate over time.

The healthcare workforce shortage has been a concern for several years but hit a crisis stage as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. For many years, the failure of the workforce to adequately reflect the racial, ethnic, linguistic and cultural diversity of Rhode Islanders has been acknowledged as a barrier to appropriate care.

A public/private partnership convened by the Executive Office of Health and Human Services has collaborated over the past few years to analyze the workforce problems and propose a “Rhode Ahead” framework for addressing them.

The group emphasized the need to diversify the professional healthcare workforce so there would be more opportunity for culturally and linguistically appropriate care for Rhode Islanders. Since the paraprofessional workforce is already diverse, the group recommended creating the Ladders to Licensure grant program (H-8078) to provide support for paraprofessionals to pursue higher education degrees and professional licensure while they continue to work.

I recently worked with indigenous people, at the Narragansett Indian Health Center. Their basic mistrust of “white people” in healthcare strongly influenced their decisions to participate in recommended healthcare for people of all races. By increasing all diversity in healthcare, we can reach and serve more people in need of care.

We also support investing state funds to expand the health professional loan repayment program (H-8079) which will help increase the number of healthcare professionals working in underserved areas of the state. By increasing the number of doctors, mental health professionals, dentists and other critical providers in safety-net practices we enhance access as well as improve the diversity of providers.

I graduated from a major university with a Bachelor of Science in Nursing. The cost of attending was covered by my savings, summer work, and \$10,000 in loans. This amount is a pittance now that the cost of higher education is so exorbitant. Any loan repayment help will encourage the higher education needed for this highly specialized work.

These two bills, along with Representative Fogarty’s bills (H-7903 and H-7902) that address the gap in access to primary care, are a clear set of actionable and achievable approaches that will make a demonstrable difference in strengthening and diversifying the workforce.

Karen E Johnson APRN, CNP, FNP-C
mysunnyone@gmail.com
401-714-8079