



May 1, 2024

RI General Assembly
RI State House
82 Smith St.
Providence, RI 02903

Re: Testimony in support of House Bills: 80796/ 8078

Dear Chair Abney and Members of the House Finance committee,

I, Denise Coppa, from House District 31 and Legislative Liaison, representing the Nurse Practitioner Alliance of Rhode Island, am writing in support of House Bills 8079/ 8078. To clarify, Certified Nurse Practitioners (CNP) are Advanced Practice Registered Nurses (APRN) who have successfully completed advanced education at the masters and/ or doctoral level and have taken professional certification or “board” exams that allow them to be licensed by the state of RI, with full practice authority. This includes the ability to diagnose, treat, and prescribe medications and to be the primary care provider of record for citizens in Rhode Island, across the life span. I teach in the nurse practitioner program at the University of RI and am a nurse practitioner in the Hasbro Children’s Hospital Pediatric Clinic. I am very aware of the challenges of finding community based mentors for our students and for the patients that I and over 1000 nurse practitioners in the state care for.

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.

Many health care providers, such as nurse practitioners, work in patient centered medical homes and in Federally Qualified Health Centers. These settings care for many underrepresented minority and underprivileged families, many of whom do not have English as their first languages. These settings, at present, do not have enough professional nurses from diverse backgrounds that can best serve this

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population. This bill would help to bolster the professional nursing task force of individuals best able to relate to and care for the total population, not just white, middle class families.

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, primary care nurse practitioners, dentists and other critical providers in safety-net practices we enhance access as well as improve the diversity of providers.

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.

Patients in all primary care practices deserve the right to establish and maintain meaningful relationships with their primary care providers, regardless of the setting where the provider practices. Please support this bill, essential to maintaining patient access to primary care providers.

Sincerely,

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