



May 1, 2024

RE: Letter of Support for: H8079 and H8078
TO: Chairman Abney and Members of the House Finance Committee
Merrill R. Thomas
CEO and Executive Director
The Providence Community Health Centers

Good afternoon,

My name is Merrill Thomas, and I am CEO and Executive Director of the Providence Community Health Centers (PCHC) here in Providence, RI.

PCHC has been providing medical care in Providence for over 55 years, and currently serves over 85,000 patients. PCHC serves 70% of Medicaid patients, and we do not turn anyone away based on ability to pay. We provide over 275,000 visits a year, and currently are not able to meet the demand for patients. We have over a 3,000-patient waiting list due to the lack of providers.

This is my 40th year of serving in community health centers, and the current shortage of primary care providers is the worst I have ever experienced. We currently have over 20 open vacancies for providers, including Doctors, Dentist, Hygienist, Nurse Practitioners and Social Workers. One of the most asked questions in Rhode Island today is, can you find me a Primary Care provider. It is not just the health centers, but across the State.

In the past 4 years, we have increased pay to our providers by over 30%, to retain our providers and match competing offers. But we are losing the battle, mostly to our neighboring States. Also, since COVID, we have seen most of our providers choose to either retire, and or reduce their hours, further adding to the shortage of available providers. The recent Insurance Commissioners report on Primary Care Shortage is spot on in identifying the issue, and I believe this legislation is crucial for Rhode Island to begin addressing the problem.

The legislation before you today is a start to addressing one of the major areas where Rhode Island is not competitive. Last year, the Community Health Centers in Massachusetts were awarded \$25 million in loan repayment dollars. We simply can't compete when just 20 miles away Providers can obtain additional loan repayments that we cannot offer. This legislation would begin to address the looming crisis that is only going to get worse. One of the largest areas of concern for new medical providers is their school debt, which can usually be over \$300,000. Loan repayment is a proven tool to attract and retain providers. PCHC does participate in the National Health Service Corp loan repayments, and in the current State loan repayment plans, but there are still more applicants than funding, and especially for new providers entering the job market fresh out of school.

These two bills, along with Representative Fogarty's' bills (H-7903 and H7902) address the gap in access to primary care, and help Rhode Island become more competitive.

Again, I want to share that we need the State's help in attracting and keeping Primary Care Providers, and these bills are a definite step in the right direction.

Thank you,

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