



To: House Finance Committee
From: Karen Malcolm, Protect Our Healthcare Coalition (email: ProtectRIHealth@gmail.com)
Date: May 1, 2024
Re: SUPPORT H-8078 (Ladders to Licensure) and H-8079 (Health Professional Loan Repayment)

The Protect Our HealthCare Coalition is a group of leading Rhode Island non-profits and consumer groups with a shared mission to protect, improve, and expand equitable access to quality, person-centered, affordable health care for all.

The Coalition **strongly supports Representative Tanzi's bills, H-8078 and H-8079**, which will strengthen and diversify Rhode Island's healthcare workforce.

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.

Happily, over the past few years, there have been at least two collaborations among state agency staff and community providers, advocates, and others that have conducted 'deep dives' into the challenges in the healthcare workforce and developed a set of strategies to address the immediate and longer-term issues.

The Rhode Ahead¹ framework, developed through a multi-year Healthcare Workforce Planning Project led by EOHS in partnership with the Department of Labor and Training and the Office of Post-Secondary Commissioner in collaboration with a broad range of community stakeholders, provides concrete steps to strengthen the workforce.

Rhode Ahead emphasizes the need to diversify the professional healthcare workforce so there will 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. In the first year EOHS in partnership with sister state agencies would fund three to four partnerships with a focus on

¹ <https://eohhs.ri.gov/sites/g/files/xkgbur226/files/2023-06/Copy%20of%20Health%20Summit%20One%20Pager%20Final.pdf>

behavioral health and nursing. Its design as a public/private partnership will capture private funds to help train the workforce that our healthcare system urgently needs.

It should be noted that EOHHS proposed Ladders to Licensure as an initiative to include in the Governor's 2025 FY Budget. Unfortunately, the Governor chose not to do so, and now the General Assembly has the opportunity to include this innovative program in the adopted budget.

Another strategy to increase the number of primary care professionals is to enact **H-8079, which provides \$50,000 loan repayment for professionals working in various disciplines, including medical, behavioral health, and dental.** The loan repayments are an incentive for health professionals to practice in communities where there are significant shortages of health care providers. Recipients commit to working for two years at community health centers, behavioral health centers, dental clinics, and other safety net sites. Over the years, the program has demonstrated that it is a very effective tool in recruiting and retaining highly qualified health professionals.

These two bills, in concert with two bills sponsored by Representative Fogarty that focus on increasing the number of primary care physicians, nurse practitioners, and physician assistants (H-7903 and H-7902), are an integrated set of actions and investments that are critical to enact now to address current shortages in access to care and to avoid deeper problems down the road.

We urge the committee's support for these bills.

Thank you.

Protect Our Healthcare Coalition allies & partners: Economic Progress Institute, Mental Health Association RI, RI NOW, RI Parent Information Network, The Womxn Project, RI Health Center Association, United Way of Rhode Island, Planned Parenthood of Southern New England, SEIU Rhode Island Council, American Cancer Society Cancer Action Network, American Heart Association, Leukemia/Lymphoma Society, Foster Forward, RI Coalition for the Homeless, Rhode Island Working Families Party, Mental Health Recovery Coalition, Oasis Wellness & Recovery Center, RI Community Food Bank, Substance Use & Mental Health Leadership Council, Rhode Island Coalition for Children and Families, HousingWorks RI, Rhode Island Organizing Project (RIOP), Thundermist Health Center, National Association of Social Workers RI Chapter, Advocates for Better Care