

## Chris O'Brien

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**From:** Latino Mental Health <latinomentalhealthri@gmail.com>  
**Sent:** Wednesday, May 1, 2024 11:32 AM  
**To:** House Finance Committee  
**Subject:** Support H-8079 and H-8078

May 1, 2024

RE: Support for H-8079 and H-8078

To Chairman Abney and Members of the House Finance Committee:

The Latino Mental Health Network of RI (LMHNRI) is a community initiative that aims to recruit and retain Latin@ mental health professionals by providing support and professional development.

We are acutely aware that 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.

The LMHNRI has many members that are paraprofessionals and would like to pursue higher education but financial barriers make it very difficult for them to start a program. Furthermore, many times they need to complete an internship and need to make the challenging choice of either working 80 hours or more or not continuing their education.

We also support investing state funds to expand the health professional loan repayment program (H-7089) 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.

Members of the LMHNRI have been recipients of federal loan repayment programs and it truly has been life changing. They have been able to purchase a home and stay in a career that they love. Many have shared that if they hadn't received the loan repayment, they would have left the field.

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.

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