

May 1, 2024

Honorable Rep. Marvin Abney
Chair, House Finance Committee
RI General Assembly
82 Smith St.
Providence, RI 02903

RE: Support for H-8078 and H-8079

To Chairman Abney and Members of the House Finance Committee:

The Rhode Island Health Center Association (RIHCA) strongly supports House Bill 8078, to advance the careers of health care paraprofessionals, and House Bill 8079 to increase the annual appropriation for the Health Professional Loan Repayment Program.

RIHCA supports the state's eight Community Health Centers (CHC) in their efforts to provide high-quality health care to every Rhode Islander, regardless of their ability to pay. CHCs are the primary care safety-net providers for over 200,000 individuals: 90% of their patients have incomes at or below 200% of the federal poverty level (less than \$52,000 per year for a family of 3), 55% of their patients are enrolled in Medicaid, and 9% are uninsured.

Today, the CHCs are challenged to meet the increasing demand for patient care because of workforce shortages. The number of people served by a CHC in Rhode Island increased by 18% between 2017 and 2022, without a commensurate increase in workforce. There are not enough primary care clinicians to meet the needs of patients.

The need to increase the numbers of primary care clinicians offers us an opportunity to ensure we establish a workforce that reflects Rhode Islanders' racial, ethnic, linguistic, and cultural diversity. 40% of CHC patients identify as Hispanic/Latino, 25% belong to a racial minority group, and 23% are best served in a language other than English. Developing a diverse workforce will enhance the CHCs' ability to improve patient satisfaction and health outcomes.

H-8078 and H-8079, with Representative Fogarty's bills H-7903 and H-7902, are a clear set of actionable and achievable interventions that will make a demonstrable difference in strengthening and diversifying the workforce.

*Rhode Island Health Center Association proudly supports:
Blackstone Valley Community Health Care ~ Comprehensive Community Action Program
East Bay Community Action Program ~ Providence Community Health Centers
Thundermist Health Center ~ Tri-County Community Action Agency
WellOne Primary Medical and Dental Care ~ Wood River Health*

H-8078 creates the Ladders to Licensure grant program. This will support paraprofessionals as they pursue higher education degrees and professional licensure while they continue to work. Rhode Island's current paraprofessional workforce already reflects our diverse population – we need to ensure our licensed health care workforce is also diverse.

H-8079 seeks state funds to expand the health professional loan repayment program. This investment will help increase the number of health care 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 and improve the diversity of providers. Loan repayment is an important tool for recruiting and retaining licensed health care professionals.

Thank you,

Elena Nicolella

Elena Nicolella
President and CEO