

March 27, 2025

The Honorable Marvin L. Abney

Chair, House Finance Committee

Rhode Island State House, 82 Smith Street, Providence, Rhode Island 02903

RE: Amend HB 5076 – Department of Health FY2025 Supplemental and FY2026 Budgets

Dear Chair Abney and Members of the Committee,

I am writing as a proud member of the Bristol Health Equity Zones (HEZ). I served as the Coordinator of the Bristol Health Equity Zone from its inception for seven years and I saw firsthand the impact that it has had on our community. Since that time, I have served on the Steering Committee and as a facilitator for the Suicide Prevention group.

I write in opposition of the Rhode Island Department of Health budget as it is currently written, and in support of restoring the \$2.1 million allocation to fund all 14 of Rhode Island HEZs. The HEZ initiative serves Rhode Island's most vulnerable residents by utilizing a unique, community-driven approach to improving the overall health and resilience of communities throughout the state. The proposed budget lacks support for these collaboratives that have become a critical part of the state's public health infrastructure.

This nationally recognized model has measurably demonstrated its impact over the last ten years, such as:

- Reducing healthcare costs: The average per person public insurance costs are significantly lower in Equity Zone communities than those not in an Equity Zone.
- Reducing rates of chronic disease: Many Equity Zones show lower chronic disease rates than expected given their social vulnerability, with high cholesterol and heart disease declining faster than the state average.
- Strengthening community resilience and recovery: From 2018 to 2022, social vulnerability in Equity Zone communities dropped by 21%. Lower vulnerability

reduces harm from disasters, economic downturns, and health crises, enabling faster recovery and response.

In Bristol local HEZ has: facilitated the creation of the East Bay Recovery Center, bringing recovery services to our community, led many suicide prevention initiatives, including having resource signs put on either side of the Mount Hope bridge, and led cooking demonstrations over the last 10 years, providing free ingredients so our residents can learn to make healthy meals and enjoy a free on themselves. The HEZ network is an integral part of our state's ability to support our most vulnerable residents, and ultimately create healthy, equitable communities. It is vital that the HEZ initiative is adequately funded to ensure sustainable continuation of its critical work.

I urge the Committee to include HEZ funding in RIDOH's budget. A \$2.1 million allocation guarantees \$150,000 in support of each HEZ.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "E Spence". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal line extending from the end of the name.

Emily Spence

Bristol Resident

Bristol Health Equity Zone.