

March 25, 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 from West Elmwood Housing Development Corporation, a proud member of the 02907 Health Equity Zones (HEZ). 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.

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. A \$2.1 million allocation guarantees \$150,000 in support of each HEZ.

Sincerely,

Jessica Thigpen

West Elmwood Housing Development Corporation

02907 HEZ