



March 25, 2025

The Honorable Teresa Tanzi
Chair, House Finance Committee, Subcommittee on Human Services
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 Family Service of Rhode Island (FSRI) a proud member of the South Providence Health Equity Zone (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.

In South Providence, the work of our local HEZ over the past year has included: coordinating local vaccine events that have administered over 1300 vaccines to South Providence community members; distributing basic needs items including over 5,300 diapers; and partnering with RI Energy, the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program, Inspiring Minds, Breathe Providence, and many other community organizations to connect South Providence community members with resources. This is only some of the important work.

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.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony.

Sincerely,

Kinzel Thomas
Vice President of Equity and Community Development