

# Health Equity Zone

## West Warwick

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 on behalf of the West Warwick Health Equity Zone collaborative. 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 West Warwick Health Equity Zone (WWHEZ) has played a transformative role in addressing housing instability and advancing health equity in the community. Through its recent housing needs assessment, data sharing event, and advocacy for the 183 Washington Street project with the Women's Development Corporation (WDC), WWHEZ has helped drive data-informed, community-centered solutions that respond to the urgent need for stable, affordable housing.

The housing needs assessment was a crucial step in identifying the most pressing challenges faced by residents experiencing homelessness and housing instability. Conducted with 51 individuals, this survey provided critical insights into barriers to shelter, rental affordability, and access to supportive services. This data has not only validated community concerns but has also provided a roadmap for policy advocacy and program development, ensuring that interventions are aligned with real community needs.

To ensure transparency and collaboration, WWHEZ hosted a Housing & Homelessness Data Sharing Event, bringing together local leaders, housing advocates, and people with lived experience of homelessness. This event created an opportunity for stakeholders to engage directly with the data, fostering dialogue on potential solutions and mobilizing collective action. The event reinforced the importance of community-driven advocacy, emphasizing that those most affected by housing instability must have a seat at the table when decisions are made.

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One of the most tangible impacts of WWHEZ's work has been its support of the 183 Washington Street project, a permanent supportive housing development led by WDC. This project, informed by the findings of the housing needs assessment, is a direct response to the gaps in housing availability identified through WWHEZ's research and outreach efforts. By advocating for and supporting the development of affordable, long-term housing solutions, WWHEZ has helped secure sustainable, equity-focused interventions that will have a lasting impact on the West Warwick community.

Through data collection, community engagement, and collaborative partnerships, WWHEZ continues to be a catalyst for systemic change, ensuring that housing is recognized as a fundamental determinant of health. The work done over the past year has strengthened relationships between community organizations, policymakers, and service providers, paving the way for policy improvements, increased funding opportunities, and greater awareness of housing-related health disparities. As WWHEZ moves forward, its commitment to advancing health equity through housing stability will remain at the core of its mission, ensuring that all residents have access to the resources and opportunities they need to thrive.

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,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Meg Donnelly', written in a cursive style.

Meg Donnelly, Project Manager, West Warwick Health Equity Zone