

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

March 25, 2025

Dear Chair Abney and Members of the Committee,

As the **Steering Committee of the Washington County Health Equity Zone (HEZ)**, we represent a collaborative of organizations deeply engaged in the work of the HEZ and its efforts in advancing community health. We write today in opposition to the proposed Rhode Island Department of Health budget as currently written and urge the restoration of **full funding for all 14 HEZs**. The HEZ initiative is a **nationally recognized, community-driven model** that has strengthened the health and resilience of Rhode Island communities for over a decade. The proposed budget **fails to support this critical public health infrastructure**, jeopardizing essential programs and partnerships that directly improve the lives of residents across the state.

HEZs Deliver Measurable Impact

A modest \$2.1 million annual investment yields significant, long-term, results-driven benefits, including:

- **Healthcare cost reduction:** The average per person public insurance costs are significantly lower in HEZ communities.
- **Chronic disease reduction:** HEZ communities show lower chronic disease rates than expected given their social vulnerability, with high cholesterol and heart disease declining faster than the state average.
- **Community resilience:** From 2018 to 2022, social vulnerability in HEZ dropped by 21%, improving the ability to withstand and recover from crises and economic downturns.

Washington County HEZ: Addressing Urgent Needs

We have tackled pressing health issues with data-driven, community-led solutions at the local level, including:

- **Behavioral Health & Suicide Prevention:** Washington County had the **highest suicide rates in Rhode Island**, with a **20% increase from 2013 to 2015**. To address this crisis, we implemented a **county-wide, comprehensive prevention approach**, including:
 - Training over **1,000** police officers, parents, teachers, and community members in **Mental Health First Aid**.

- Securing federal funding to support our hospitals and community health centers to screen **125,000** patients for depression and suicide risk through the **Zero Suicide** initiative.
- Embedding **Community Health Workers** in emergency departments, leading to **44 fewer emergency visits** for seven high-utilizing individuals and **649 interventions** for 277 individuals.
- **Reducing Criminal Justice Involvement:** Through our Crisis Intervention Team (CIT) training for law enforcement officers, we have successfully:
 - **Diverted 529 individuals from arrest in 2019 alone**, directly them to community based mental health services instead.
 - **Reduced costs associated with incarceration which ensuring individuals receive.** With 40% of calls to dispatch in Narragansett related to behavioral health crises and an average annual cost of \$58,564 to incarcerate someone, we reduced costs while ensuring individuals receive the care they need, improving public safety and health outcomes.

Critical Need: A behavioral health triage system for Washington County & housing support

The most urgent priorities identified by our residents, municipalities, and community organizations are: 1. the need for a behavioral health triage center to divert individuals from overcrowded emergency departments and 2. affordable housing options (for which, we have secured a HUD PRO Housing grant, which residents, and our towns are relying on to drive local housing solutions.) Without HEZ infrastructure, no single organization has the capacity to lead these initiatives. **HEZs are uniquely positioned** to facilitate cross-sector collaboration and shared decision-making and without this infrastructure, critical initiatives like this cannot move forward.

Investing in HEZ is an Investment in Rhode Island’s Future

The HEZ network is an integral part of our state’s ability to create **strong, thriving communities**. Without adequate funding, Rhode Island risks undoing years of progress and innovation that have significant impact on the health and well-being of all Rhode Islanders. We urge the Committee to **restore full funding to the HEZ initiative** to ensure that these vital efforts continue.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Washington County Health Equity Zone (Healthy Bodies Healthy Minds)
Steering Committee:

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Chair, HBHM
Reverend, St. Thomas
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