



Conexion Latina Newport
170 Broadway Newport, RI 02840
401 585-8165

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 Conexión Latina Newport, an organization that has received tremendous support from the Newport Health Equity Zones (HEZ), and has been able to in turn provide services and supports to the Newport Hispanic community. 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 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. Lost collaborations like that between the Newport HEZ and Conexión Latina Newport would be a detriment to the health and wellness of at-risk communities throughout our state.

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 Newport, our local HEZ has:

- Trained and empowered 20-30 Community Health Workers, who are genuine members of the community they serve, and understand the barriers, cultural concerns and equity issues that face Newport communities every day. These people have gone on to become advocates, doulas, full time community health workers in local organizations (including 3 at Conexion Latina) and several other related careers.
- Became the communication and support bridge to the community during the Gas outage during the frigid winter of 2019 and COVID.
- Facilitated the first ever North End Equitable Development Strategy (NEEDS) assessment and used it as the guide for their work, ensuring the voice of the community is at the center of all of the work done in the North End.
- Trained and built a team of policy advocates that were able to fight for fair and accessible transportation, the halt to unfair construction, the construction of a Bike Path, and several other projects.

The HEZ network is an integral part of our City and 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,

Rebekah Gomez
Executive Director
Conexion Latina Newport
Member, Newport HEZ