



April 2, 2025

The Honorable Marvin L. Abney
Chair, House Finance Committee
Rhode Island State House, 82 Smith Street, Providence, Rhode Island 02903

RE: Governor's FY 2026, FY 2025 Revised and Capital Budgets, Executive Office of Health & Human Services

Dear Chair Abney and Members of the Committee,

I write to you today on behalf of the Central Providence Opportunities Health Equity Zone (CPO-HEZ). I serve as the Managing Director of One Central Providence, leading the team within One Neighborhood Builders that serves as the backbone organization for our HEZ, which we conceive of as a collective impact initiative of 60+ partners.

Last week, I submitted written and verbal testimony encouraging the Committee to ensure that Health Equity Zones are funded in the FY26 budget. This message is no less relevant today, as you consider the budget of the Executive Office of Health & Human Services (EOHHS).

While the Health Equity Zone initiative has historically been situated within the RI Department of Health & their budget, there is legislation being considered by the General Assembly to move the initiative under EOHHS and rename them Equity Zones (HB 5849 & SB 0697) -- the Rhode Island Equity Zone Act. At the hearing for HB 5849 last week, both community members & House Health & Human Services Committee members expressed strong support for this bill.

Therefore, it would be prudent to consider adding the Health Equity Zone initiative to the EOHHS budget for FY26, in particular the HEZ contracts (commonly known as "Infrastructure" or "CORE" funding) that would total \$2.1M for the 14 Health Equity Zones across the state (\$150k each).

Moving the HEZ initiative to EOHHS makes sense in a few key respects:

1. It enables a whole-of-government approach and facilitates improved coordination across state departments & agencies in the entire EOHHS portfolio and beyond
2. Broadens the application of the contractual efficiencies that HEZs provide beyond RIDOH (e.g., RIDOH can quickly deploy funds & programs across RI communities through and in partnership with HEZs)

As I shared last week, we know that the HEZ model works and is worth sustaining and investing in. From 2018 to 2022, even in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, social vulnerability dropped by over 20% in HEZ communities (compared to non-HEZ RI communities) and demonstrates the impact HEZs have had in strengthening community resilience. Additional finding demonstrate that HEZs:

- Reduce healthcare costs: The average per person public insurance costs are significantly lower in Equity Zone communities than those not in an Equity Zone.
- Reduce 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.

The data is clear, and the message is even clearer: **Rhode Island needs Health Equity Zones.** And without consistent funding and state commitment, Health Equity Zones will not continue. HEZs have become a critical part of the state's public health infrastructure. A budget allocation of \$2.1 million would guarantee \$150,000 in support of each HEZ. The HEZ network is an integral part of our state's ability to support our most vulnerable residents, and ultimately creates healthy, equitable communities.

It is vital that the HEZ initiative is adequately funded to ensure sustainable continuation of its critical work – both in our communities of Central Providence and statewide. Without the HEZ initiative, we would not have been able to launch the largest participatory budgeting initiative in the state and deploy \$1 million to support residents' ideas for how to improve health. Without the HEZ initiative, we would not have been able to support and help train 40 Community Health Workers that are now deployed across our community. Without the HEZ initiative, we would not be able to provide small business support & loans through a Community Health Worker model of wraparound supports. Without the HEZ initiative, we would not have been able to produce and release the Central Providence Roadmap outlining a shared vision for our neighborhoods and a commitment of partnership from the state to help us achieve it. The point is clear: the HEZ initiative drives innovation, resourcefulness, and improved coordination across the state.

I urge the Committee to consider including HEZ funding in EOHHS's budget.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Anusha Venkataraman
Managing Director of One Central Providence, One Neighborhood Builders