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From: Alison Hayward <ahs.hayward@gmail.com>
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To: House Health and Human Services Committee
Subject: SUPPORT: H5168

To the esteemed committee members:

As physicians serving patients in the state of Rhode Island, we play a pivotal role not only in treating illnesses but also in preventing them, and as members of the Rhode Island Medical Society's Planetary Health Committee, we believe that we can help to prevent illness in our patients in ways beyond simply offering testing and treatment. With the knowledge that climate change has a significant effect on a multitude of human health concerns from heat related illness to cardiovascular and pulmonary diseases, our goal is to advocate for reductions in carbon emissions. One significant preventive measure is reducing carbon emissions by transitioning to renewable energy sources. In Rhode Island, this initiative is gaining momentum, exemplified by House Bill 5168, which mandates all state-licensed healthcare facilities to begin to convert their operations from fossil fuels to renewable energy sources.

This transition is imperative for both human health and economic efficiency.

Human Health Benefits

Hospitals are substantial energy consumers, often relying on fossil fuels that emit pollutants detrimental to human health. The combustion of these fuels releases particulate matter, nitrogen oxides, and sulfur dioxide, contributing to respiratory and cardiovascular diseases. By shifting to renewable energy sources such as solar, wind, and geothermal, hospitals can significantly reduce these harmful emissions.

Moreover, the healthcare sector's commitment to sustainability influences public perception and behavior. When hospitals lead by example, they encourage communities to adopt environmentally friendly practices, fostering a culture of health that extends beyond medical treatments.

Rhode Island Hospital, for example, is one of the top ten greenhouse gas emitters in the state (and one of only 3 in the top ten which is not an energy company/power plant) and increased its greenhouse gas emissions by almost 9% from 2011 to 2020. It is clear that without any change in direction, this trend would get in the way of reaching the goals set by the Act on Climate.

Economic Advantages

Transitioning to renewable energy is not just an environmental imperative but also an economic opportunity. The decreasing costs of renewable technologies make them increasingly competitive with traditional energy sources. **Hospitals that invest in renewable energy can achieve substantial cost savings over time through reduced utility bills and protection against volatile fossil fuel prices.** Additionally, various state and federal incentives are available to support such initiatives. For instance, Rhode Island offers programs through the Office of Energy Resources, Rhode Island Energy, and Rhode Island Commerce, providing grants and technical assistance for renewable energy projects.

Healthcare facilities have opposed the concept of being required to even begin to transition away from fossil fuel use with the argument that it is financially prohibitive. However, there are numerous opportunities that these facilities could utilize to meet the basic requirements of HB5168, especially considering many of them have ongoing building projects or major renovations ongoing or planned soon in which utilizing some degree of renewable energy would be feasible and again, actually be more cost effective in the long term. Even purchasing electric or hybrid vehicles as part of their business operations could represent beginning to transition away from fossil fuel reliance.

Legislative Action and Regional Comparisons

Rhode Island can take a proactive step with House Bill 5168 in working towards achieving the goal of the Act on Climate, requiring healthcare facilities to begin to transition to renewable energy.

Such policies position Rhode Island as a leader in sustainable healthcare practices. Comparatively, other states are implementing similar initiatives. Massachusetts just passed landmark climate legislation to promote clean energy use across all sectors and has also passed aggressive targets for carbon emission reductions.

New York's Clean Green Hospitals program provides funding and technical assistance to hospitals investing in energy efficiency and clean energy technologies. Maine hospitals have launched green initiatives to offset high energy use, including discontinuing certain anesthetic gases and adopting renewable heating sources. These examples demonstrate a regional commitment to reducing the healthcare sector's carbon footprint. Although driving change is always a challenge, motivating the beginning of a transition of Rhode Island's hospitals to renewable energy is a critical step toward safeguarding public health and achieving economic sustainability. By reducing harmful emissions, healthcare facilities can prevent disease and promote wellness, fulfilling their fundamental mission. Economically, the shift offers cost savings and stability in energy expenditures over the long term, and the fact that there will be some degree of cost to start this transition should not be seen as an impossible barrier towards ever beginning it. Further legislation is needed to actually facilitate movement towards the goals set by the Act on Climate, otherwise lack of any mechanism to drive adherence will render the bill meaningless.

Measures like House Bill 5168, by helping to ensure that healthcare facilities commit to reductions in greenhouse gas emissions, will help to achieve the critical goals set by Act on Climate, and will promote the health of Rhode Islanders and we enthusiastically support the bill for these reasons.

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Rhode Island Medical Society Planetary Health Committee

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