

March 27, 2025

The Honorable Susan R. Donovan
Chair, House Health and Human Services Committee
Rhode Island State House, 82 Smith Street, Providence, Rhode Island 02903

RE: Support for HB 5849 – An Act Relating to State Affairs and Government – Office of Health and Human Services

Dear Chair Donovan and Members of the Committee,

We are writing in strong support of The Rhode Island Equity Zone Act (House Bill 5849), sponsored by Representative Teresa Tanzi. This bill would establish the State's Health Equity Zones as The Rhode Island Equity Zone (RIEZ) network, a formal program with the Executive Office of Health and Human Services (EOHHS). Codifying the RIEZ network would help our state improve the social determinants of health: environmental and social factors that shape health and well-being. These conditions shape our access to economic opportunity, high quality education, medical care, and safe environments. Unfortunately, inequitable access to resources in various neighborhoods contributes to persistent health disparities that disproportionately affect communities of color and those who earn the lowest incomes. Rigorous research has shown that addressing these conditions and inequities improves health, reduces costs, and builds community resilience.

The RIEZ (currently known as Health Equity Zone, or HEZ) initiative is a network of 14 community-based collaboratives across Rhode Island working to address local health disparities. Each HEZ brings together residents, organizations, healthcare providers, businesses, and government agencies. By working directly with communities, HEZs provide services, resources, and support that impact the "upstream" factors contributing to poor health outcomes.

We are the conveners, members, and partners of Rhode Island's existing HEZs. We have seen firsthand the impact this network has had on our state, including:

- **Reducing healthcare costs:** The average per person public insurance costs are significantly lower in HEZ communities than those not in a HEZ.
- **Reducing rates of chronic disease:** Many HEZ communities show lower chronic disease rates than expected given their social vulnerability – a term that indicates demographic and socioeconomic factors that negatively impact a community's ability to recover from adverse events –with high cholesterol and heart disease rates declining faster than the state average.
- **Strengthening community resilience and recovery:** From 2018 to 2022, social vulnerability in HEZ communities dropped by 21% compared to non-HEZ communities.

Lower vulnerability enables faster recovery and response from disasters, economic downturns, and health crises, thereby mitigating harm after these events.

- **Serving as a national model for health equity:** HEZs have secured significant federal and private investment, reducing the burden on the State budget and encouraging other states and localities to invest in proven, place-based, collaborative approaches to advance health equity.

Rhode Island is better off because of the ten years that the HEZ network has existed here. We know that investing in communities works. By addressing root causes of health, we can continue to advance opportunities for economic and social mobility for all Rhode Islanders.

We strongly encourage this Committee to pass HB 5849 and commit to advancing health and well-being in Rhode Island.

Thank you for your consideration.

Signed,

1. Anusha Venkatarman, Managing Director, One Neighborhood Builders (Convener of Central Providence Health Equity Zone)
2. Lucy Berman, Associate Director, One Neighborhood Builders (Convener of Central Providence Health Equity Zone)
3. Bari Freeman, Executive Director, Bike Newport (Affiliate of Newport Health Equity Zone)
4. Lola Herrera Ximenez (Affiliate of Newport Health Equity Zone)
5. Aaron Coutu, Library Director, Warwick Public Library (Affiliate of Warwick Health Equity Zone)
6. Jessica Thigpen, HEZ Program Director, West Elmwood Housing (Convener of 02907 Health Equity Zone)
7. Dariel Blanco, Deputy Director, West Elmwood Housing (Convener of 02907 Health Equity Zone)
8. Deidre Jones, Community Health Worker, CCAP (Convener of Warwick Health Equity Zone)
9. Brady Dunklee, MPH (Affiliate of Central Providence and Pawtucket/Central Falls Health Equity Zones)
10. Cindy Cabrera (Affiliate of Central Providence Health Equity Zone)
11. Brooke Myers, Nursing Director, Thrive Behavioral Health (Affiliate of Warwick Health Equity Zone)
12. Aleyra Lamarche, Community Engagement Liaison, Care New England (Affiliate of Pawtucket/Central Falls Health Equity Zone)
13. Jessica Williams, School-Based Community Health Worker (Affiliate of Bristol Health Equity Zone)

14. Maya Hussein, Research Coordinator, Meals on Wheels of Rhode Island (Affiliate of East Providence Health Equity Zone)
15. Beth Pinkham, Associate Director, Ocean State Center for Independent Living
16. Sydney Ormerod, Director of Prevention, Women's Resource Center (Convener of Newport Health Equity Zone)
17. Kristen Frady, Program Manager, Wood River Health Services (Convener of Washington County Health Equity Zone)
18. Daniel Fitzgerald, Executive Director, Wellbeing Collaborative (Affiliate of Washington County Health Equity Zone)
19. Ben Darby, Assistant Director of Community Development, WDC/HOC (Affiliate of Washington County and West Warwick Health Equity Zones)
20. David Banks-Richardson, Community Engagement Coordinator, Family Service of Rhode Island (Convener of South Providence Health Equity Zone)
21. Nancy Letendre, Town Planner, Town of Westerly (Affiliate of Washington County Health Equity Zone)
22. Molly Ahern, Senior Planner, City of East Providence (Affiliate of East Providence Health Equity Zone)
23. Melissa Campbell, Policy Manager, Rhode Island Health Center Association
24. Missy Menders, Head Start Assistant Director, Tri-County Community Action Agency (Affiliate of Washington County Health Equity Zone)
25. Chris Gross, Chief Empathy Officer, FabNewport (Affiliate of Newport Health Equity Zone)
26. Alyssa Gleason, Project Director, East Bay Community Action Program (Convener of Bristol, East Providence, and Warren Health Equity Zones)
27. Lisa Kennedy, HEZ Director, Tri-County Community Action Agency (Convener of Tri-County Health Equity Zone)
28. Morgan Leonard, Executive Director, Clinica Esperanza (Affiliate of Central Providence Health Equity Zone)
29. Melissa Goldstein, Project Director, East Bay Community Action Program (Convener of Bristol, East Providence, and Warren Health Equity Zones)
30. Emily Markovitz, Director of Student Enrichment, Inspiring Minds (Affiliate of Central Providence Health Equity Zone)
31. Joe Garlick, Executive Director, NeighborWorks Blackstone River Valley (Affiliate of Woonsocket Health Equity Zone)
32. Jeanne Michon, Executive Director, New Beginnings Inc. (Affiliate of Woonsocket Health Equity Zone)
33. Rita Capotosto, Vice President of Family Development, East Bay Community Action Program (Convener of Bristol, East Providence, and Warren Health Equity Zones)
34. Tracy Ramos, Secretary of Board of Directors, East Bay Community Action Program (Convener of Bristol, East Providence, and Warren Health Equity Zones)
35. Michelle Taylor, Vice President of Social Health Services, Community Care Alliance (Affiliate of Warwick and Woonsocket Health Equity Zones)
36. Lynne Driscoll, Assistant Vice President of Community Health, South County Health (Affiliate of Washington County Health Equity Zone)

37. Petra Lehman, Owner, Create Power Yoga (Affiliate of East Providence Health Equity Zone)
38. Vanessa Volz, President & CEO, Sojourner House (Affiliate of West Warwick and Woonsocket Health Equity Zones)
39. Perla Fernandez, Social Worker and Community Health Worker (Affiliate of Tri-County Health Equity Zone)
40. Rebecca Nichols, Finance Administrative Assistant, East Bay Community Action Program (Convener of Bristol, East Providence, and Warren Health Equity Zones)
41. Rush T. Frazier, Executive Director, Youth Pride Inc. (Affiliate of Central Providence Health Equity Zone)
42. Melissa Sigua, Community Health Project Coordinator, Yale New Haven Health (Affiliate of Washington County Health Equity Zone)
43. Lindsey Greene-Upshaw, Senior Manager, Yale New Haven Health (Affiliate of Washington County Health Equity Zone)
44. Bethanie Rado, Youth & Media Relations Coordinator, East Providence Prevention Coalition (Affiliate of East Providence Health Equity Zone)
45. Sherry Holmes, Outreach Coordinator, Grace Family Church of Rhode Island (Affiliate of West Warwick Health Equity Zone)
46. Maria Saillant, Community Liaison, West Warwick Public Library (Affiliate of West Warwick Health Equity Zone)
47. Rashaa Al-Sasah, Head of Youth Services, West Warwick Public Library (Affiliate of West Warwick Health Equity Zone)
48. Carissa Koski (Affiliate of West Warwick Health Equity Zone)
49. Natasha Harrison, Executive Director, Newport Tree Conservancy (Affiliate of Newport Health Equity Zone)
50. Tunj Schartner, Executive Director, MAE Organization Inc (Affiliate of West Warwick Health Equity Zone)
51. Emily Spence (Affiliate of Bristol Health Equity Zone)
52. Kristin Read, HEZ Director, East Bay Community Action Program (Convener of Bristol, East Providence, and Warren Health Equity Zones)
53. Teddi Jallow, Executive Director, Refugee Dream Center (Affiliate of Central Providence Health Equity Zone)
54. Johandalys Montas, Director of Youth Engagement, The WATCH Coalition (Affiliate of Woonsocket Health Equity Zone)
55. Tara Cimini (Affiliate of West Warwick and Woonsocket Health Equity Zones)
56. Ana Antonopoulos (Affiliate of West Warwick and Woonsocket Health Equity Zones)