



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,

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

I write in strong support of **The Rhode Island Equity Zone Act (House Bill 5849)**, sponsored by Representative Teresa Tanzi in the House. 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.

The Health Equity Zone initiative has been no less than transformative to our work in Central Providence. When the initiative began in 2015, One Neighborhood Builders was convening partners in Olneyville to address issues of community health; this soon grew to three neighborhoods, then nine, and the work expanded as well. Today, the Central Providence Opportunities Health Equity Zone (CPO-HEZ) is a nationally recognized place-based initiative to address health and economic equity across two ZIP codes in Providence (02908 and 02909). In 2023, we released the Central Providence Roadmap, outlining our collective vision for vibrant, healthy, and safe communities as well as the strategies to impact the root causes of continued

health, economic, educational inequities. We have helped build leaders in Central Providence that are contributing to their neighborhoods and local organizations in innumerable ways.

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. And 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.

We have seen these successes borne out in HEZs across the state. The recently completed statewide evaluation has demonstrated that Health Equity Zones:

- **Reduce healthcare costs:** The average per person public insurance costs are significantly lower in HEZ communities than those not in a HEZ.
- **Reduce 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.
- **Strengthen 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.
- **Serve 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 Islanders, and in particular residents of Central Providence, are 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.

I 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,

Dominique Resendes

Associate Director of Community Infrastructure at One Neighborhood Builders

Central Providence Opportunities Health Equity Zone