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Testimony on H-5849, HEZ
House Health & Human Services Committee
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Good afternoon, Chairperson Donovan and members of the House Health & Human Services Committee. My name is **Jocelyn Antonio**, and I serve as the **Director of Program Implementation and Policy** at the Hassenfeld Child Health Innovation Institute at the Brown University School of Public Health. I am providing this testimony in my personal capacity.

I express my **strong support for H-5849 – An Act Relating to State Affairs and Government – Office of Health and Human Services**, sponsored by Representative Tanzi and co-sponsored by Representatives Alzate, Cotter, Speakman, Carson, Donovan, Potter, Cruz, Stewart, Kislak, and Cortvriend.

This legislation would formally establish the Rhode Island Equity Zone (RIEZ) network within the Executive Office of Health and Human Services (EOHHS), building upon the current Health Equity Zone (HEZ) model. The HEZs are designed prevent health inequities and reduce the need for costly treatment by addressing the root causes of poor health outcomes – namely, social/structural determinants of health (SDOH) and systemic.

Public Health Implication of Addressing Social Determinants of Health.

The World Health Organizations defines SDOH as the non-medical factors that influence – such as housing, education, employment, income, environment, transportation, and access to food. SDOH shape the quality of our lives and account for the majority of health inequities we observe across populations.¹

Research shows:

- For individuals under 19, 60% of health outcomes are driven by physical and socioeconomic environment alone
- For adult over 65 years, 75% of health outcomes are influenced by environmental variable like food access and life expectancy.²
- Children born to parents without a high school diploma are more likely to live in an environment that poses barriers to health- such as unsafe neighborhoods, substandard housing, lack of parks or libraries – and experience chronic stress that affects health across the lifespan, and even across generation.³

Programs like HEZ, are crucial in addressing SDOH and health inequities.

Benefits of Establishing Equity Zones

¹ World Health Organization, “Social Determinants of Health.”

² Millard Krause, DrPH, Schaefer, MPH, and Highfield, PhD, “The Association of Social Determinants of Health With Health Outcomes. | EBSCOhost.”

³ Artiga and Published, “Living in an Immigrant Family in America.”

Community-Centered Solutions: By fostering collaboration among local stakeholders, equity zones empower communities to identify and address their unique health challenges, leading to more effective and sustainable interventions.

Resource Optimization: Coordinated efforts within equity zones can enhance the efficiency of resource allocation, ensuring that services are not duplicated and that gaps in care are addressed promptly.

Improved Health Outcomes: Targeting SDOH through localized strategies can lead to reductions in health disparities, lower incidence of preventable diseases, and overall improved community health.

Economic Advantages: Healthier communities can experience economic benefits, including increased productivity and reduced healthcare costs, as preventive measures decrease the need for expensive medical treatments.

Conclusion

The continuation and formalization of the work being done by Health Equity Zones is a vital investment in Rhode Island's public health infrastructure—and a national model for advancing health equity not just in name, but in practice. Establishing the Rhode Island Equity Zone (RIEZ) network ensures that we sustain and scale local, community-driven, data-informed solutions to address long-standing health disparities.

It's not often that Rhode Island finds itself leading the nation—but with the HEZ model, we are. Other states are watching and learning from the success happening here. Let's continue to be a beacon of hope and preserve a model that is truly making a difference.

I urge the committee to support and pass this critical legislation to protect and promote the well-being of all Rhode Islanders.

Thank you for your time and consideration,

Jocelyn Antonio, MPH

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Reference:

- Artiga, Samantha, and Petry Ubri Published. "Living in an Immigrant Family in America: How Fear and Toxic Stress Are Affecting Daily Life, Well-Being, & Health." *KFF* (blog), December 13, 2017. <https://www.kff.org/racial-equity-and-health-policy/issue-brief/living-in-an-immigrant-family-in-america-how-fear-and-toxic-stress-are-affecting-daily-life-well-being-health/>.
- Millard Krause, DrPH, Trudy, Caroline Schaefer, MPH, and Linda Highfield, PhD. "The Association of Social Determinants of Health With Health Outcomes. | EBSCOhost." *American Journal of Managed Care* 27, no. 3 (March 1, 2021): 89. <https://doi.org/10.37765/ajmc.2021.88603>.
- World Health Organization. "Social Determinants of Health," May 30, 2019. <https://www.who.int/health-topics/social-determinants-of-health>.