

March 27, 2025

The Honorable Susan 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 am writing from the Bristol Health Equity Zone, a proud member of the East Bay Health Equity Zones (HEZ). I write in support of HB 5849, which you are scheduled to hear today. This bill will establish the RI Equity Zone network as a formal program within the RI Executive Office of Health and Human Services, as such will enhance sustainability of the Health Equity Zones.

The HEZ initiative across 14 sites in the state serves Rhode Island's most vulnerable residents by utilizing a unique, community-driven approach to improving the overall health and resilience of communities throughout the state.

This nationally recognized model has measurably demonstrated its impact over the last ten years, such as:

- Reducing healthcare costs: The average per person public insurance costs are significantly lower in Equity Zone communities than those not in an Equity Zone.
- Reducing 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.
- Strengthening community resilience and recovery: From 2018 to 2022, social vulnerability in Equity Zone communities dropped by 21%. Lower vulnerability reduces harm from disasters, economic downturns, and health crises, enabling faster recovery and response.

Over these ten years, the Bristol Health Equity Zone has created a network of partners to support positive impacts for hundreds of community members. We are true to our mission while being responsive to emerging needs, informed by data and the input of residents, first responders, and schools, among other many other stakeholders.

We work both upstream and downstream in matters of health – behavioral, physical, and social, the latter grounded in the concept that robust social health is linked to good physical and behavioral health outcomes. A growing body of research demonstrates that when we feel isolated, alone, and without the support of family, friends and or other social networks in community, we are at risk of poorer health and greater risk of disease and even mortality. As Rhode Island continues to navigate out of pandemic isolation, grapple with the current “epidemic of loneliness,” address dependency on screentime, the upstream work we do becomes more critical. The downstream work we do continues to support whole-health in community, through advocacy, education, and opportunity to receive support when needed and actively engage in supporting our community when we can.

This in essence is no different than the other Rhode Island HEZs. The HEZ network is an integral part of our state’s ability to support our most vulnerable residents, and ultimately create healthy, equitable communities. It is vital that the HEZ initiative is sustainable to continue its critical work.

I urge the Committee to include support HB 5849.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Kate Hawley".

Kate Hawley, Community Champion

Personal Health & Wellness Work Group

Bristol HEZ