

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

March 27, 2025

Dear Chair Donovan and Members of the Committee,

We write today in strong support of **The Rhode Island Equity Zone Act (House Bill 5849)**, sponsored by Representative Teresa Tanzi. As the **Steering Committee of Healthy Bodies Healthy Minds (HBHM)**, The Washington County Health Equity Zone (HEZ), we represent a collaborative of organizations deeply engaged in advancing community health through the HEZ.

House Bill 5849 would establish the State's Health Equity Zones as The Rhode Island Equity Zone (RIEZ) network, a formal program under the Executive Office of Health and Human Services (EOHHS). For the past decade, Rhode Island's HEZs have worked to address the root causes of health disparities, driving systemic change through collaboration and community leadership. Research shows that addressing these conditions improves the health of our communities, strengthens community resilience, and reduces long-term state and municipal costs. Each of the 14 HEZs acts as a community-based collaborative who bring together residents, organizations, healthcare centers, businesses, and government agencies, to address their unique challenges to create lasting, positive change at the local level.

HEZs Deliver a Measurable Impact (Statewide Impact)

A modest annual investment yields significant, long-term, results-driven benefits, including:

- **Lower healthcare costs:** The average per-person public insurance costs is significantly lower in HEZ communities.
- **Reduced chronic disease:** HEZ communities show lower chronic disease rates than expected given their social vulnerability, with high cholesterol and heart disease declining faster than the state average.
- **Increased community resilience:** From 2018 to 2022, social vulnerability in HEZ dropped by 21%, improving the ability to withstand and recover from crises.
- **A respected, nationally recognized model:** RI's HEZ network is nationally recognized as a leader in health equity, affirming our efforts and demonstrating the state's commitment to supporting communities and giving residents a voice in shaping their health outcomes. This recognition is crucial for securing sustained support and attracting additional investments to further strengthen the health of all RI residents.

Washington County HEZ: Addressing Urgent Needs (Local Impact)

We've seen firsthand how the HEZ model strengthens communities and improves lives. Because of this, the Washington County HEZ is deeply **embedded in the strategic plans** of our many partner organizations. The loss of HEZ funding would have detrimental effects on critical initiatives that support our community and the meaningful progress we've made together, including:

- **Behavioral Health & Suicide Prevention:** Washington County had the highest suicide rates in Rhode Island, with a **20% increase from 2013 to 2015**. To address this crisis, we implemented a **county-wide, comprehensive prevention approach**, including:
 - Training over 1,000 police officers, parents, teachers, and community members in Mental Health First Aid.
 - Securing federal funding to support our hospitals and community health centers to screen 125,000 patients for depression and suicide risk through the Zero Suicide initiative.
 - Embedding Community Health Workers in emergency departments, leading to 44 fewer emergency visits for seven high-utilizing individuals and 649 interventions for 277 individuals.
- **Reducing Criminal Justice Involvement:** Through our Crisis Intervention Team (CIT) training for law enforcement officers, we have successfully diverted 529 individuals from arrest in 2019 alone, which reduces incarceration costs while ensuring the behavioral health support needed for individuals.

Critical Need: A behavioral health triage system for Washington County & housing support

As a community, we have identified two urgent priorities currently being worked on by our large network of partners and residents:

1. **A behavioral health triage center** to divert individuals from overcrowded Emergency rooms.
2. **Affordable housing solutions**, supported by a **HUD PRO Housing grant** that relies on HEZ infrastructure for implementation.

Without HEZ infrastructure, no single organization has the capacity to lead these initiatives. **HEZs are uniquely positioned** to facilitate cross-sector collaboration and drive these **community-based solutions**.

Investing in HEZ is an Investment in Rhode Island's Future

Rhode Island is **stronger** and **healthier** because of the HEZ network. Investing in communities works. Without adequate funding, Rhode Island **risks undoing years of progress**, impacting the health and well-being of all Rhode Islanders.

We **strongly encourage** this Committee to **pass HB 5849** and commit to the long-term success of the RIEZ network.

Thank you for your time, consideration, and commitment to the health of RI residents,

Washington County Health Equity Zone (Healthy Bodies Healthy Minds) Steering Committee:

Reverend Bettine Besier, Chair, HBHM
Reverend, St. Thomas Episcopal Church

Kate Brewster
Executive Director, Jonnycake Center of Peace Dale,

Dave Burnett
Chief Growth Officer, Neighborhood Health Plan of RI

Alison Croke
Chief Executive Officer, Wood River Health President

Jessica DeMartino
Director, Exeter Department of Social Services

Lynne Driscoll
Assistant Vice President, Community Health, South County Health

Dan Fitzgerald, Vice- Chair, HBHM
Wellbeing Collaborative, Executive Director

Kristen Frady
Program Manager, HBHM

Lindsey Greene-Upshaw
Senior Manager, Office of Health Equity at Yale New Haven Hospital

Danielle Stewart MA, LMHC
CCBHC Director - Washington County, Brown University Health

Susan Jacobsen
Senior Director of Health Equity Initiatives, Thundermist

Missy Menders
Deputy Head Start Director, Tri-County Community Action Agency

Ellen Reynolds
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Alison Warfel, PhD, MEd, ATC
Interim CEO, Block Island Health Services