



To: House Health and Human Services Committee

From: Nancy Wolanski
Director, Alliance for Nonprofit Impact at United Way of Rhode Island

Date: March 26, 2025

Re: In Support of House Bill 5849

I am the director of the Alliance for Nonprofit Impact at United Way of Rhode Island, the statewide resource center for nonprofits, and I am writing in support of House bill 5849, which would support the ongoing development of Rhode Island Equity Zones.

I serve as a member of the Health Related Social Needs Workgroup of the Governor's Rhode Island Health Care System Planning Initiative. One of the things I have appreciated the most about this opportunity is the recognition that building healthy communities does not start in the doctor's office or the hospital.

Instead, it starts in the community itself, with residents who are empowered to advocate and find solutions for pressing challenges, and organizations in those communities that are committed to working collaboratively to ensure that residents have what they need to grow and thrive.

The Health Equity Zone structure is unique in its ability to not only mobilize a collective impact approach among nonprofits, but also to bring together disparate work and funding streams across state and federal programs. Too often we see organizations and government agencies working in silos – the lack of communication, coordination, and trust can lead to duplication of effort, competition, and diminished impact.

The Equity Zone initiative provides an opportunity to improve programs, services and outcomes across Rhode Island because it centers the voice and priorities of the community and leverages the strengths of participating nonprofits and government agencies.

It is also one of the only existing state investments in nonprofit capacity and sustainability. The Alliance for Nonprofit Impact has been a partner with the HEZ initiative's Training and Technical Assistance Program, and the HEZ Learning Community Days, communities of practice, and regular resource, expertise and best practice sharing has been essential to the growth and resilience of this work.

Nonprofits serve as the state's service infrastructure, and most state agencies depend on nonprofits to provide essential services, some of which are legally mandated. It is essential that these organizations and their staff have opportunities to receive professional development, and strengthen their operations and culture.

Having the HEZ infrastructure was a critical tool during the pandemic in getting information out to the community, getting information back about needs in the community, and mobilizing support and resources where they were most needed.

Knowing that there will be significant cuts coming on the federal level that will affect the state's ability to maintain critical social services, it is even more important to ensure that Rhode Islanders have trusted partners in their communities they can rely on, and even more important that the state has trusted partners that can work collaboratively to provide essential services.

Too often, policymakers are faced with problems that require expensive interventions because they were not addressed when they were manageable and much less expensive. Equity Zones offer the opportunity to develop long-term strategies that mitigate risk, decrease long-term costs, and improve long-term outcomes.

For all of these reasons, we support House bill 5849.