

Subject: Support for the Rhode Island Equity Zone Act (S697/HB5849)

Dear Rep. Donovan and Committee Members,

I am writing to express my strong support for the Rhode Island Equity Zone Act (S697/HB5849) and to urge you to vote in favor of this critical legislation. As a Community Organizer with the West Warwick HEZ, I have seen firsthand how Rhode Island's Health Equity Zones (HEZs) positively impact our communities by addressing the root causes of health disparities and improving the social determinants of health.

The Rhode Island Equity Zone Act would formally establish Health Equity Zones within the Executive Office of Health & Human Services (EOHHS), ensuring long-term sustainability and dedicated funding to continue this essential work. Currently, HEZs must compete for funding on an annual basis, diverting valuable time and resources away from serving Rhode Islanders. By creating a stable funding pathway, this legislation would allow HEZs to focus on critical initiatives such as housing stability, food security, economic development, and access to healthcare.

HEZs across the state have already demonstrated significant success:

- Food Security: The Cranston HEZ distributed over 2,600 bags of food at their weekly farmer's market.
- Education: Warwick HEZ piloted a mental health program in middle schools, connecting students and families to mental health resources.
- Healthcare: Washington County HEZ supported 125,000 patient screenings for depression and suicidal ideation through the Zero Suicide initiative.
- Economic Stability: Central Providence HEZ launched a Community Loan Fund, awarding \$285,000 to 18 minority-owned small businesses.

In West Warwick, our HEZ has played a critical role in addressing housing instability, particularly through their recent housing needs assessment and data report, which identified key barriers to housing access and directly informed solutions like the 183 Washington Street permanent supportive housing project. These efforts are just one example of how HEZs drive community-driven solutions that improve health outcomes and reduce long-term costs to the state.

The Equity Zone Act would further reduce chronic disease rates, lower healthcare costs, and strengthen community resilience by institutionalizing HEZs as a sustainable, data-driven model for improving public health. Rhode Island has been a national leader in health equity, and this legislation will ensure that we continue to set the standard for how communities can take charge of their health and well-being.

I urge you to support S697/HB5849 and help secure the future of Rhode Island's Health Equity Zones. Thank you for your time and for your commitment to building a healthier, more equitable Rhode Island.

Sincerely,
Wendy Boudreau
West Warwick Health Equity Zone/ Community Organizer

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