

**RHODE ISLAND KIDS COUNT**

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**Testimony Re: House Bill 5260 and House Bill 5345, Relating to  
Delinquent And Dependent Children -- Proceedings In Family Court  
House Judiciary Committee**

**April 1, 2025**

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Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony. We would also like to thank Representative Casimiro and all co-sponsors for sponsoring these important bills.

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT would like to voice its support for House Bills 5260 and 5345. **These bills would provide needed expansions to the Voluntary Extension of Care (VEC) Program to include youth who have encountered the youth justice system, as well as raise the upper age limit for the VEC program from 21 to 26 years.**

Young people who exit foster care without permanency face significant challenges as they attempt to make the transition to adulthood on their own and fare poorly compared to other young people in the general population. Youth who age out of foster care are at risk for homelessness and unstable housing situations, as well as unemployment, and low educational attainment. Among the Class of 2023, 84% of Rhode Island students graduated high school in four years, compared to 51% of students in foster care. For these reasons, Rhode Island KIDS COUNT strongly supported the initial passage of Voluntary Extension of Care (VEC) in 2018, extending services to DCYF youth from age 18 to age 21, and we continue to carefully monitor and support implementation of the VEC program to ensure young people have access to the full array of tailored supports and services they need to be successful.

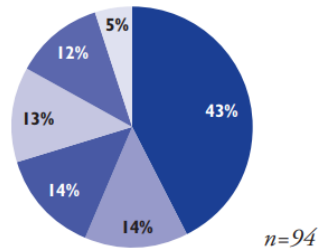
VEC helps older youth in care transition to adulthood by supporting them in setting their own goals for housing, education, employment, health care, social services, and social activities while providing guidance in decision-making. Youth must meet specific eligibility guidelines to be referred to and enrolled in the program, and to remain enrolled, youth must meet education or employment requirements. On November 30, 2023, 94 youth ages 18 to 21 were enrolled in VEC with approved court petitions. Of the 94 youth in VEC on November 30, 2023, 43% were continuing their education. Additionally, 70% had some form of employment, including 24 youth who were employed full time, and 35 who were employed part time (See charts below).

Youth may also exit care at 18 and can return to care and/ or supervision through VEC to pursue educational or career goals, for personal safety, or to further develop the skills needed for self-sufficiency. Rhode Island's VEC program is a robust framework to keep youth engaged in school and connected to the workforce, while learning important life skills.

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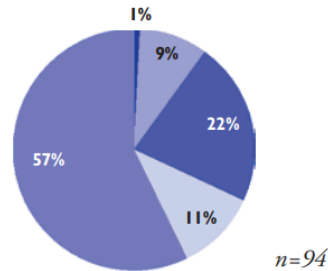
**Housing for Youth in VEC**

43% (40)	■ Apartment Alone
14% (13)	■ Former Foster Home
14% (13)	■ With Relative/Kin
13% (12)	■ Apartment with Others
12% (11)	■ Paid Independent Living
5% (5)	■ Dormitory



**Education for Youth in VEC**

1% (1)	■ Enrolled in High School
9% (8)	■ Enrolled in GED
22% (21)	■ Full-time Postsecondary
11% (10)	■ Part-time Postsecondary
57% (54)	■ Not Currently Enrolled



Source: Rhode Island Department of Children, Youth and Families, November 30, 2023.

### **Why an Expansion of the Voluntary Extension of Care Program is Beneficial**

Youth who have encountered the justice system are at risk for the same troubling outcomes as many youth in foster care. Studies find that youth who become involved in the youth justice system are several times more likely than other youth to have suffered traumatic experiences, including neglect or abuse. “Cross-over youth” are youth who have dual child welfare and youth justice involvement. Research has shown that dual involvement with the youth justice and child welfare systems is associated with an increased risk of long lengths of stay in detention, higher risks of education, career, and mental health challenges, and higher rates of recidivism. Research shows that incarceration at a young age also reduces college enrollment and completion and lowers employment and earnings in adulthood.

**Expanding the VEC program’s eligibility to include youth with wayward or delinquent petitions will provide the necessary structure and support in accessing higher education and career training opportunities as well as life skills training to support their transition back into the community and into adulthood.** The opportunity for guided case management and structure beyond 18 would be invaluable to help this group of young people obtain the education they need to pursue higher income careers to successfully support themselves in adulthood and contribute meaningfully to their community and the growth of our economy. **We urge you to pass House Bill 5260.**

Additionally, H5345 extends the option of VEC participation to youth up until their 26<sup>th</sup> birthday. Currently, the VEC program ends at age 21, however, many youth are still in higher education programs well past age 21 as many youth who have experienced foster care often require more than 4 years to complete a higher education degree program. Extending VEC to age 26 would provide continued wraparound support to youth as they complete their degrees and transition to adulthood. **Seeing youth to and through college is vital to their success.** We urge you to pass House Bill 5345. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today and for your efforts to ensure that youth in the child welfare and justice systems receive the support they need to be successful as adults.