



Children's FRIEND

Making a difference...
one child at a time.



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childrensfriendri.org



April 23, 2024

Chairman DiPalma
Senate Finance Committee
RI State House
82 Smith Street
Providence, RI 02903

Re: Testimony regarding the Governor's FY2025 Budget vis a vis DOH

Dear Chair DiPalma and members of the committee,

Our testimony today concerns the Governor's FY2025 proposed budget related to the Department of Health. We were disappointed that the Governor's budget recommends that the rates for the First Connections program return to the original pre-pandemic rates in July and then have an adjustment in October equal to 1/3 of the OHIC rate review amount. **We strongly encourage you to maintain the current First Connections home visiting program rate in your final budget, not the significantly reduced amount in the proposed FY25 Budget.** Without action by the General Assembly, the current First Connections rates will be reduced by 70% on July 1. No provider can continue to provide this service with such a dramatic rate reduction. **Senator Valverde's bill S2360 will maintain the current rates and we urge you to pass her proposal instead.**

For 190 years, we at Children's Friend have worked to advance the well-being and healthy development of the youngest and most vulnerable children in Rhode Island. Today, alongside our permanency, nutrition services, child care, Head Start and Pre-k programs, we are one of four Rhode Island agencies that run a First Connections program. We also run other home visiting programs including Nurse Family Partnership and Healthy Families America.

The First Connections program, administered by the Department of Health, is Rhode Island's emergency response and triage team for families with young children, as well as the federally required child find entity for Early Intervention services. The program provides free, voluntary home visiting services for approximately 3,000 families a year and costs the state only \$1 million a year.

First Connections casts the widest net of any program for our youngest children at most risk. According to data presented at last month's Children's Cabinet, one in four (25%) of children under age two (2) are enrolled in First Connections, more than any other program, except Medicaid.



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First Connections is funded through Medicaid and the Department of Health and has not had a permanent rate increase in 23 years. For the last two years, the State has used ARPA funds to provide a temporary rate increase which allowed us providers to continue to provide the services to families this year. However, Governor McKee's FY25 Budget proposal to implement only a third of the rate review amount recommended by the Office of Health Insurance Commissioner starting on Oct 1st will mean that the reimbursement rates for this program will be cut by 70% on July 1st. None of the four non-profit agencies that administer these services can continue these vital services with such a low reimbursement.

We also want to draw your attention to the new federal requirement for the state to continue to receive Maternal Infant and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) dollars to support other home visiting programs including Nurse Family Partnership, Healthy Families America and Parents as Teachers. **In order to draw down new federal funds for these programs, Rhode Island must invest \$241,964 in non-federal funds to access an additional \$725,893 in federal MIECHV funds.** Rhode Island is one of only two states that does not currently put any state funds into evidence-based family home visiting programs. That must change this year, or we'll lose significant federal funds. All of these programs are lifesaving, safety net programs that we cannot afford to lose. We urge you to make the necessary investments to keep them going.

Thank you for your time and review of this testimony, and for your continued efforts to support the children who are the future of our State. If you have further questions or need any additional information, please contact me at dcaprio@cfsri.org

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "David Caprio".

David Caprio
President & CEO