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Testimony Re: Department of Human Services FY 2019 Supplemental and FY 2019 Budgets

Senate Finance Committee

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Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today. Rhode Island KIDS COUNT would like to voice its strong support for several key elements of the proposed budget for the Rhode Island Department of Human Services and recommend the Department of Human Services budget include the resources needed to adequately staff the Regional Family Centers, call center, and other service centers so that our most vulnerable families receive the assistance they need to meet their basic needs.

The Importance of Adequate Staffing and Working Technology

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT strongly urges the General Assembly to continue its close oversight of the rollout and implementation of the Unified Health Infrastructure Project (UHIP) system and ensure that while problems continue to be resolved adequate staffing is put in place to address technical problems and to, at the same time, meet the immediate needs of families. We must ensure that lobby and call center wait times are reasonable and that applications and renewals are processed in a timely manner. We cannot ensure that families receive their benefits in a timely manner and get important questions and problems resolved unless we have adequate staff to man lobbies, phone lines, and other critical areas.

I also want to briefly reinforce our support for two key items that are part of Budget Article 15.

Article 15 – Tiered Reimbursement to Support Quality Improvements

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT strongly urges support for Budget Article 15 that provides \$1.5 million to establish tiered quality rates for infants and toddlers in the Child Care Assistance Program to improve access to high-quality programs.

Rhode Island is one of only nine states in the U.S. without a tiered quality rates policy. With \$5.5 million in new federal funding coming to Rhode Island through the Child Care and Development Block Grant, we urge passage of legislation to establish tiered rates for all age groups of children and pay high-quality programs at or above the nationally recommended benchmark for rates (75th percentile).

The Child Care Assistance Program has been significantly underfunded for years and currently pays rates that are well below the market rate and well below the rate recommended for access to quality care. The state should immediately establish a strong tiered quality rates system for all children under age six to support and incentivize high-quality care and education for young children. As of December 2017, 77% of children in the Child Care Assistance Program were enrolled in centers and 22% were enrolled in family child care homes

In order to meet the state's goal to double the number of third graders who can read proficiently by 2025, we need to start funding our child care system so programs can deliver high-quality early learning experiences for children starting at birth.

Article 15 – Pilot to Support Child Care Assistance for Low-Income Families Enrolled in Public Higher Education or Workforce Training

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT also urges support for the portion of Budget Article 15 that establishes a pilot program to help pay for child care for low-income parents (families with incomes below 180% of the federal poverty level which is \$37,404 for a family of three) enrolled in a qualified Rhode Island public higher education institution or workforce training program that will lead to employment.

In order to meet the state's goal to have 70% of working-age adults have a postsecondary degree or credential, we need to address the barriers to achieving these degrees and credentials, including lack of child care, transportation, etc.

Thank you for ensuring that our state has the resources we need to meet the needs of our most vulnerable families and thank you for the opportunity to testify today.