



**Testimony Re:** H-7695 Relating to Health and Safety – Maternal Mental Health

**House Health, Education & Welfare Committee**

**April 11, 2018**

**Leanne Barrett, Senior Policy Analyst**

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT supports the intent of H-7695 to ensure all mothers experiencing depression are identified and receive the treatment they need to be healthy and happy people and to provide the nurturing care young children need to thrive. We applaud the Majority Leader for his leadership in sponsoring this bill.

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT recently released an Issue Brief on this topic -- *Maternal Depression in Rhode Island: Two Generations at Risk* which include the latest data and several key recommendations to improve screening and treatment for this condition.

In 2017, the World Health Organization identified **depression as the leading cause of poor health and disability among people worldwide**. Depression affects people of all ages and social groups, but is more common among women and is associated with poverty, unemployment, occurrence of major life events (like pregnancy and having a new child), physical illness, and drug and alcohol abuse. Maternal depression is an over-arching term for long-lasting depression that occurs during pregnancy and/or the first 12 months after the birth of a new child. Depression is also common among expecting and new fathers and among adoptive mothers.

**When maternal depression is untreated, it negatively impacts both the mother and the child.** Healthy brain development in young children requires consistent, nurturing relationships and frequent, positive interactions with parents and other important caregivers. Maternal depression interferes with a mother's capacity to support healthy child development and can have long-lasting, negative effects on children's health and learning.

In Rhode Island, **nearly one out of five mothers (18.1%) with infants reported that they were diagnosed with depression during and/or after pregnancy**, with higher prevalence among mothers in low-income families, racial minorities, mothers under age 20, and mothers without a high school diploma. A history of depression is a significant risk factor for depression both during pregnancy and after the baby is born.

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT is working with the Department of Health, the Executive Office of Health and Human Services, the Department of Behavioral Healthcare, Disabilities and Hospitals, and state experts on maternal mental health to review similar legislation and policies from other states and provide specific recommendations to ensure the Rhode Island legislation is effective as possible.

At this point, we recommend developing legislative language to:

- **Require RIte Care/Medicaid and private health insurance providers to cover routine screenings** for maternal depression

- during prenatal appointments and pediatric well-baby appointments, as recommended by the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG) and the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP). **Ensure maternal depression screenings can be billed through the child's health insurance coverage** as recommended by national experts.
- Require RIte Care/Medicaid and private health insurance providers to cover evaluation, diagnosis, and treatment of maternal depression, **including dyadic mother-infant therapy to be billed through the child's insurance**. Research shows that it is important to both treat the mother's depression and provide simultaneous interventions to improve mother-child interactions.
- **Provide funding for professional development opportunities** for prenatal and pediatric care providers to support routine screening and referrals for maternal depression evaluation and treatment.
- **Provide funding for a public awareness campaign** to support new parents and reduce the stigma associated with seeking help for mental health issues.

It is also important to make policy decisions and invest state resources to reduce risk factors that contribute to maternal depression, including untreated mental health problems across the lifespan, poverty and economic insecurity, inadequate housing, domestic violence, and unintended pregnancy. Both paid family leave and access to high-quality child care help prevent maternal depression as they support new mothers economic well-being as well as the healthy development of their child.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify. Rhode Island KIDS COUNT applauds the General Assembly for consideration of legislation to address this important two-generation issue. We are working to review similar legislation enacted by other states to provide more specific recommendations on legislative language.