



RHODE ISLAND KIDS COUNT

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Testimony Re: Governor's FY 2019 revised, FY 2020 and Capital Budgets Department of Human Services

House Finance Committee: Subcommittee on Human Services

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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

Although we have seen recent improvements in phone and in-person wait times in application and processing Rhode Island KIDS COUNT strongly urges the General Assembly to continue its close oversight of the implementation of the Unified Health Infrastructure Project (UHIP) system and ensure that adequate staffing is in place to 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 the Governor's proposed FY2020 budget.

Child Care Assistance Program

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT supports the governor's plan to allocate \$700,000 to increase the tiered rates for preschoolers (children ages 3 to 5) in the Child Care Assistance Program who are enrolled in child care centers and to allocate \$150,000 to increase and establish tiered quality rates for all children under age 6 in family child care. Last year, the General Assembly took a significant step forward by increasing and establishing tiered quality rates for child care centers serving children under age 6, funded with \$3.6 million in federal resources available through the Child Care and Development Block Grant.

The rate for infants and toddlers in 5-star centers now meets the federal benchmark for equal access to quality, the 75th percentile of a recent market rates study.

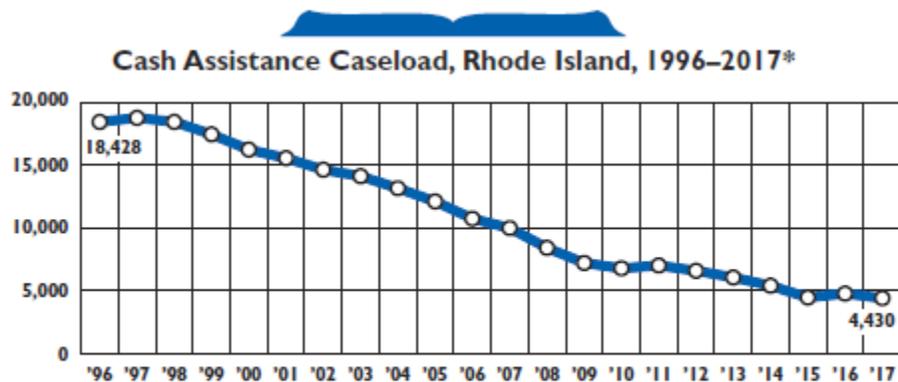
However, the planned rate increase for preschool children in centers still does not meet the federal benchmark. CCAP rates for preschool children in 5-star centers are currently \$195.67/week while the federal benchmark for equal access to quality is \$230.00/week. The Governor's proposal will get program closer to the federal benchmark but still not reach it.

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT recommends the rate plan in Representative Diaz and Senator Crowley's bills (H-5106 and S-282) which would increase the rate for preschoolers in 5-star centers to meet the federal benchmark and include adoption of tiered quality rates for school-age children.

We strongly agree with the Governor Raimondo's proposal to remove the requirement inserted during Governor Carcieri's administration which prohibits state payment rates that exceed fees charged to private paying families. This requirement means that programs must raise the fees for all families in order to pull in the higher payments from the state to support quality.

Rhode Island Works

We also support the proposal to eliminate the periodic time limit for the Rhode Island Works (RI Works) program, the state's TANF (or welfare) program for low-income families. This program helps very low-income families meet their basic needs by providing cash assistance, SNAP benefits, health insurance, and subsidized child care to families and by providing parents with the education, training, and workforce readiness programs they need to prepare for success in the workplace.



Source: Rhode Island Department of Human Services, InRhodes Database, December 1, 1996–2015 and RI Bridges Database, December 2016 and 2017. Cases can be child-only or whole families and multiple people can be included in one case.
*The Rhode Island Department of Human Services changed the method for calculating the caseload data starting in the 2012 Factbook. This change is reflected in 2010–2017 caseload data. Comparisons to earlier years should be made with caution. Starting in 2016, caseload data are for the month of December and not for a point in time, December 1.

Many parents receiving RI Works assistance have multiple barriers to employment, including limited literacy and/or English proficiency, physical and behavioral health challenges, and histories of domestic violence and/or homelessness. Thirty-one percent of parents have not completed high school, and more than one-third (37%) of those tested in English tested at or below the sixth-grade reading level, while almost two-thirds (66%) of native Spanish speakers enrolled in RI Works tested at or below the sixth-grade reading level on a Spanish-language version of the test.

The current 24-month time limit does not provide enough time for parents to prepare for entry into and success in the workforce. Rhode Island is one of only eight states that imposes a periodic time limit on its entire caseload. We urge you to repeal the state's 24-month periodic time limit which will simplify the program and allow parents the time they need to prepare for success in our state's workforce.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.