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Testimony Re: House Bill 5617 Re: Rhode Island Works Program
House Finance Committee
May 15, 2019
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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 House Bill 5617. This bill would improve the economic and educational outcomes of RI Works participants through the following provisions:

1. Removal of the condition that there needs to be a reasonable expectation that a 19-year-old will complete a program in secondary school in order to qualify as a dependent child.
2. Provision of an additional 12 months of vocational training to a participant who completes his/her first year at Community College of Rhode Island (CCRI).

The goal of RI Works is to help very low-income families meet their basic needs by providing cash assistance and work supports, including employment services, SNAP benefits, health insurance, and subsidized child care. Children and families qualify for cash assistance based on their income, resources, and the number of people in their families. RI Works provides a safety net for some children whose parents are unable to work due to a disability and can function as an unemployment system for parents who do not have sufficient earnings or work experience to qualify for unemployment benefits. RI Works also provides time-limited supplementary cash assistance to very low-income working families.

Removal of qualifying condition for 19-year-old child

Children in poverty, especially those who experience poverty in early childhood and for extended periods, are more likely to experience difficulty in school. Children in poverty are less likely to be enrolled in preschool, more likely to attend schools that lack resources and rigor and have fewer opportunities to participate in extracurricular activities. As a result, low-income children require additional resources, including time, to meet rigorous academic expectations.

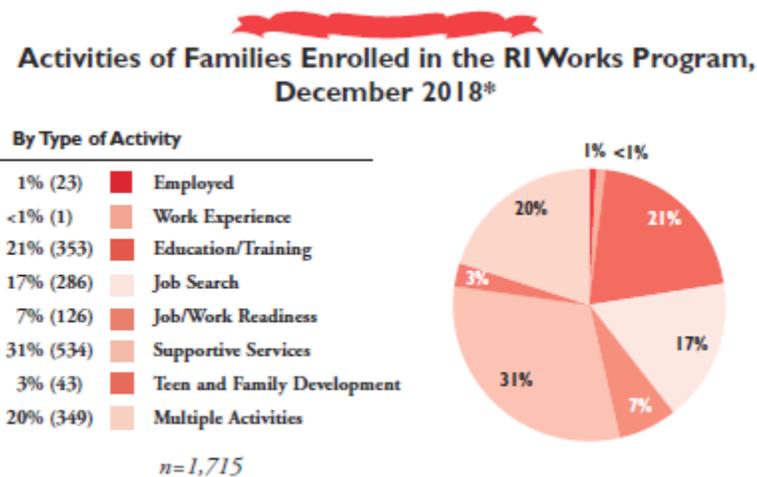
Rhode Island calculates five- and six-year graduation rates to recognize that graduation is an accomplishment regardless of the time it takes. Of the 11,053 Rhode Island students who enrolled in ninth grade in 2012, 352 (3%) graduated in five years in 2017, and 59 (1%) graduated in six years in

2018. Of the 352 students who graduated in five years in 2017, 291 (83%) were low-income students. Of the 59 students who graduated in six years in 2018, 42 (70%) were low-income students.

The proposed bill will acknowledge that it may take more time for low-income students to complete secondary school and will decrease the need for students to drop out of school to find employment as a means of contributing to their family income before completing high school.

Provision of an additional 12 months of vocational training

RI Works cash assistance recipients must participate in an employment plan unless they meet specific criteria for an exemption. Parents should be informed about opportunities to seek additional education or training to improve their employability prospects.



Source: Rhode Island Department of Human Services, RI Bridges Database, December 2018. *Some cases may have a work activity and a work exemption during the same month. Percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

As of December 2018, 21% of families were participating in education or training programs, up from 15% in December 2017. House Bill 5617 would also allow a participant who completes his/her first year at CCRI to qualify for an additional 12 months of vocational training. By 2020 (next year), 71% of jobs in Rhode Island will require post-secondary education beyond high school. Allowing RI Works recipients to complete a second year of vocational training will help more RI Works recipients obtain the education they need to get and keep a job that will provide a family sustaining wage.

We encourage you to support this bill which will help improve the economic situation and employability of some of our most vulnerable children and families.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.