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Testimony Re: Senate Bills 490, 491, 493, and 718
Senate Housing and Municipal Government Committee
March 27, 2025
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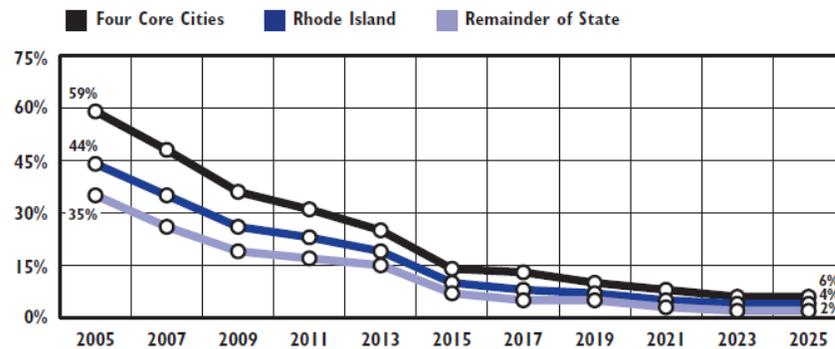
Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today. Rhode Island KIDS COUNT would like to voice its opposition to changes contained in Senate Bills 490, 491, 493, and 718 that would weaken the lead poisoning prevention and housing equity legislation that was passed in 2023 and delay the timeline for its enforcement.

Lead poisoning is a serious and entirely preventable children's health and environmental justice issue with lifelong consequences, affecting hundreds of Rhode Island children every year. Lead exposure, even at very low levels, can cause irreversible damage, including slowed growth and development, learning disabilities, behavioral problems, and neurological damage. Though rare, severe poisoning can result in seizures, comas, and even death. The societal costs of childhood lead poisoning include the loss of future earnings due to cognitive impairment and increased medical, special education, and juvenile justice costs.

Lead exposure occurs in places where children spend the most time, especially in their homes. Exposure can come from lead paint in older homes, contaminated soil, and contaminated drinking water from tens of thousands of remaining lead service lines statewide.

Rhode Island has a lead poisoning prevention foundation that involves several prevention, surveillance, and enforcement mechanisms that have led to a significant decline in the number of children with lead poisoning.

Children Entering Kindergarten with History of Elevated* Blood Lead Level ($\geq 5 \mu\text{g/dL}$), Rhode Island, Four Core Cities, and Remainder of State, 2005-2025



Source: Rhode Island Department of Health, Healthy Homes and Childhood Lead Poisoning Prevention Program, Children entering kindergarten between 2005 and 2025. *Elevated blood lead level of $\geq 5 \mu\text{g/dL}$.

Despite the declines shown in the chart above, children continue to be exposed to lead. In Rhode Island, children living in the four core cities, where the child poverty rates are highest, are at increased risk for lead exposure because the housing stock tends to be older and they are more likely to be renters. Lead paint (including paint dust or chips) is the primary mechanism through which children are exposed to lead in Rhode Island.

- In 2023, 595 (2.4%) of the 24,741 Rhode Island children under age six who were screened had confirmed elevated blood lead levels of $\geq 5 \mu\text{g/dL}$.
- Children living in the four core cities (4.0%) were more likely than children in the remainder of the state (1.3%) to have confirmed elevated blood lead levels of $\geq 5 \mu\text{g/dL}$.

Rhode Island has a valuable tool to ensure compliance with efforts that already exist to prevent lead poisoning- the lead rental registry. Guaranteeing compliance with our lead laws is fundamental to eradicating lead poisoning because it is exceedingly rare for children to be poisoned in homes that are fully compliant with existing law – but compliance must be maintained to protect all Rhode Island children.

Senate Bill 490 makes the registry private and only accessible by specific entities. **This would limit public access to the registry and prevent families from making informed decisions about where they can safely rent and live.**

Senate Bill 491 establishes that the rental registry requirements would not apply to units that do not “house or contain an at-risk occupant,” which would include pregnant tenants and children. **This could leave children at risk for lead poisoning if they spend substantial time in units to which the**

registry does not apply, such as a grandparent's home (which would thus be exempt because the unit does not "house or contain" a child). It could also result in housing discrimination against children and families by landlords who do not want to have their properties lead certified.

Senate Bill 493 prevents a landlord who does not obtain a lead certificate in accordance with the lead mitigation laws due to delays on behalf of the State from being penalized. **We strongly believe that this bill weakens an important component of housing equity and lead poisoning prevention and urge the State to take all necessary steps to provide lead certificates and protect the health of Rhode Island children.**

Senate Bill 718 would limit the mandatory rental registry to properties constructed prior to 1978 and further push the effective date of required registration to September 1, 2025, with the penalty clause becoming effective October 1, 2025. **This bill undermines the intent of the mandatory rental registry and delays its implementation, potentially leaving more children at risk for lead poisoning.**

A comprehensive and strong rental registry for all properties will improve public health and safety, consumer protection, and housing policymaking in our state. It is vital that this compliance information be accessible and usable for all Rhode Islanders.

Thank you for the leadership that the General Assembly has shown in lead poisoning prevention.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.