



**Testimony Re: H-7994 An Act Relating to State Affairs and Government
-- Department of Children, Youth and Families -- The Powers and Scope
of Activities**

House Health and Human Services Committee

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Madam Chair and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today. Rhode Island KIDS COUNT would like to voice its support for House Bill 7994. We would like to thank Representative Casimiro for sponsoring this important bill, and Representatives Shallcross Smith, Alzate, Tanzi, Stewart, Dawson, Fogarty, Caldwell, Donovan, and Potter for cosponsoring. This bill would require the Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF) to create a framework for children's behavioral health services that adheres to Medicaid requirements and expands the scope and power of DCYF to oversee and administer comprehensive behavioral health services for children with serious emotional disturbances and children with developmental or functional disabilities.

Mental health influences children's physical health as well as their behavior at home, in school, and in the community. Mental health conditions can impair daily functioning, prevent or affect academic achievement, increase involvement with youth justice and child welfare systems, result in high treatment costs, diminish family incomes, and increase the risk of suicide. Mental health problems affect children of all backgrounds and ages. In 2022-2023, nearly one in three (30%) children aged three to 17 had a mental, emotional, or behavioral health problem in Rhode Island. However, many children and youth have trouble getting mental health treatment. **In Rhode Island in 2022-2023, more than half (52%) of children aged three to 17 who needed mental health treatment or counseling had a problem obtaining needed care.**

Mental health systems tend to be fragmented and crisis-driven with disproportionate spending on high-end care and often inadequate investments in prevention and community-based services. Rhode Island is currently in a federal consent decree with the United States Department of Justice related to the hospitalization of children with behavioral health disabilities in state care. This consent decree calls for a behavioral health system to be redeveloped out of DCYF to build a more robust, community-based children's behavioral health system - one designed specifically to meet the unique developmental needs of children and families timely and effectively.

To ensure integrated, accessible, and responsive services for children and families, a coordinated system of care framework and governance structure is needed. Children's behavioral health is not simply a smaller

version of the adult system. It requires specialized services, family engagement, and a prevention-focused approach that reflects the distinct needs of children. Currently, DCYF is statutorily responsible for overseeing children's behavioral health. Preserving clear leadership and accountability within DCYF helps ensure these needs remain front and center. DCYF has the authority and context to ensure that children's mental health- in all cases- is treated appropriately.

Rhode Island needs a system of care framework for children's behavioral health services, which will ensure that children and families have access to comprehensive community-based services that are flexible, coordinated, child centered, trauma-informed and culturally responsive. By ensuring children receive the support they need, we will both increase access to needed and timely care and remain in compliance with the federal consent decree.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony, and we urge passage.