

RHODE ISLAND KIDS COUNT
ONE UNION STATION
PROVIDENCE, RHODE ISLAND 02903
401/351-9400 • 401/351-1758 (FAX)



Testimony Re: House Bill 7689 – The Rhode Island Works Program
House Judiciary Committee
March 04, 2026
Jessica Vega, Senior Advocacy & Community Engagement Manager

Madame Chair 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 7689 and thank Representative Handy for sponsoring this bill and Representatives Stewart, Alzate, Slater, Kislak, Kazarian, Caldwell, Giraldo, Ajello, and Cruz for co-sponsoring. This legislation seeks to make several improvements to the Rhode Island Works Program. These improvements would include:

- Increasing the monthly cash benefit to 100% of the federal poverty level and providing annual cost-of-living adjustments, so benefits don't lose value through inflation.
- Raising the amount of child support that goes directly to families to \$100 for one child and \$200 for families with two or more children
- Eliminating the waiting period for lawful permanent residents to receive benefits
- Eliminating the \$65 benefit reduction for families living in subsidized housing.

[The Rhode Island Works Program](#)

The Rhode Island Works (RI Works) Program assists very low-income families in meeting their basic needs through various forms of support, including cash assistance, employment services, food assistance, health insurance, and subsidized child care. As of December 2024, there were 3,650 families including 6,388 children under age 18 enrolled in RI Works. Sixty-eight percent of RI Works beneficiaries were children, and 39% of the children enrolled in RI Works were under the age of six. House Bill 7689 would strengthen the current program through targeted policies that will improve the economic security of families and support children with the greatest need.

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT is the co-lead convener of the Raising RI Coalition, a group of 60 advocacy, faith-based, health care, and social service organizations dedicated to lifting children out of poverty by increasing the RI Works benefit and to breaking the cycle of poverty by providing parents with education and training opportunities leading to well-paying, secure jobs. Coalition members include the Economic Progress Institute, Rhode Island AFL-CIO, The Rhode Island Interfaith Coalition to Reduce Poverty, the Right from the Start Campaign, United Way of Rhode Island, The Rhode Island Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics, The Rhode Island Coalition Against Domestic Violence, and many more.

We thank the General Assembly for the significant reforms it has made over the past few years to improve the lives of families enrolled in RI Works, including two benefit increases after 30 years of stagnant benefits. These improvements have made a difference in the lives of Rhode Island families; however, additional reforms are needed to ensure that Rhode Island children and families living in deep poverty get the support they need to live healthy lives.

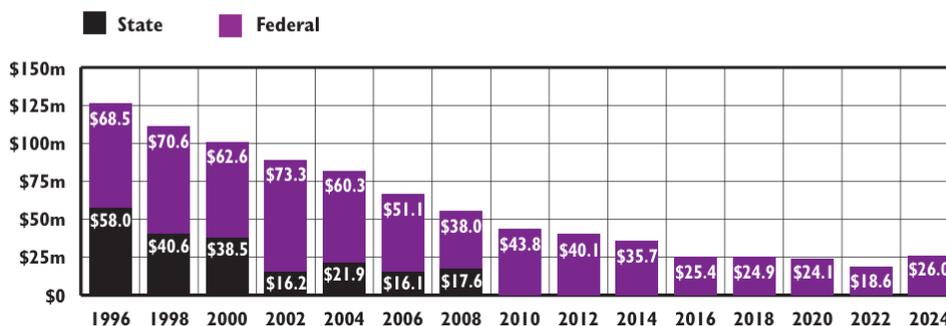
We urge the General Assembly to make the following improvements to the program.

- Protect Rhode Island children and families from deep poverty and the effects of inflation:** In 2024, the benefit was increased for the second time after 30 years without benefit increases, increasing the benefit from 40% to 41% of the federal poverty level (FPL). This was an improvement, but still left children living in extreme poverty, a circumstance that not only impacts their immediate health and well-being, but also their behavioral, educational, and social outcomes and has long-term consequences for their success in life.

We urge the General Assembly to increase the benefit to 100% FPL and to include a cost-of-living adjustment, so the benefit will continue to be adjusted to follow changes in the FPL. Currently, the benefit (\$865 per month for a family of three) is equal to only 41% of the 2024 federal poverty level. Without a cost-of-living increase, the benefit will continue to lose value. **This increase can be funded using the federal TANF block grant and would not require any additional state dollars.**



Rhode Island Cash Assistance Expenditures, State Fiscal Years 1996-2024



- Increase the child support pass-through:** In Rhode Island, only the first \$50 of child support payments goes directly to the custodial parent receiving RI Works assistance; the rest is kept by the government to reimburse itself for providing benefits. The state does not currently contribute any general revenue to support the RI Works program. Child support is a vital resource for low-income families and plays a key role in reducing child poverty. For children in single-parent households, these payments can significantly improve financial stability—sometimes nearly doubling the income of those living in poverty. Under federal guidelines, states have the flexibility to pass through up to \$100 for one child and \$200 for two or more children to families each month without penalty. States can count the portion of child support passed through and disregarded for families receiving assistance toward their TANF maintenance of effort obligations. In Maryland, for example, families receive up to \$100 for one child and up to \$200 for two or more children through the pass-through policy.

- **Support the well-being of immigrant families:** In 1996, along with ‘welfare reform’ that led to enactment of TANF, Congress put in place restrictions on public benefit programs for immigrants who were lawfully living in the U.S., including prohibiting lawful permanent residents (LPRs) (people with green cards) from receiving SNAP, Medicaid, and TANF until they had been in this status for five years. When Rhode Island enacted the Family Independence Program (FIP), LPR families were eligible for assistance if they met program rules, without a five-year wait. The state used general revenue to provide assistance. When FIP was replaced by RI Works in 2007, the state instituted a five-year waiting period for LPR families to save general revenue.

These families live, work, pay taxes, and raise children in Rhode Island, yet are blocked from programs meant to help them gain skills and secure stable employment. This bill would remove the five-year waiting period so families can get job training and other work supports sooner, strengthen their economic stability, and better support their children. Thirteen states including Maryland, Georgia, Wisconsin, Connecticut, and New York already allow income-eligible families with lawful permanent residency to access these benefits without a waiting period. Rhode Island can do the same using state funds and strengthen our workforce and invest in families’ long-term stability.

- **Eliminate the \$65 Reduction for Families in Subsidized Housing:** Rhode Island automatically reduces the RI Works benefit by \$65 for families living in subsidized housing, even though these families are already low-income and the cost of living continues to rise. Eliminating this reduction would allow families to use that money for essentials like baby formula, medication, or transportation to work and medical appointments. **This increase can be funded using the federal TANF block grant and would not require any additional state dollars.**

In recent years, the General Assembly and the Governor have made housing a priority for our state. This policy aligns with that priority by helping families avoid unnecessary crises and remain in their homes.

Rhode Island currently receives \$95 million in federal funds through the TANF block grant. In FY 2023, Rhode Island spent \$12 million—17% of the total TANF spending—on basic cash assistance. TANF block grants are meant to be spent on basic assistance, so we have room to grow in this area and use more of these funds for its primary purpose – supporting our poorest children and families. We can make important changes to the RI Works program by investing more of federal TANF funds in direct assistance for the 3,650 families in this program. We can make even more of a difference if we invest state funds in our most vulnerable children and families.

We encourage the General Assembly to support the proposed improvements to the Rhode Island Works program. These changes have long been needed and are essential for improving families' current economic security and the future success of our children.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify today.