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Testimony Re: H-5986 Continuous Coverage Birth through 5
House Finance Committee
May 4, 2023
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Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today. Rhode Island KIDS COUNT and the Right from the Start Campaign would like to voice their strong support for House Bill 5986. This bill would establish that children from birth through age five who are enrolled in Medicaid/Rite Care shall qualify for continuous eligibility to ensure stable health coverage for infants and young children during this critical period.

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT coordinates the Right from the Start Campaign, a state policy coalition led by eight organizations to advance state policies and budget priorities that will help families with young children and this bill is one of the campaign's legislative priorities. Rhode Island KIDS COUNT would like to thank Representative Slater for his leadership and for sponsoring this bill and would like to thank the cosponsors, Representatives Diaz, Cruz, Potter, Voas, and Kislak.

Stable health insurance coverage for babies and young children helps children receive high-quality and timely preventive health care, including vaccinations, physical and developmental screenings, routine care for illnesses, specialized health care when needed, and emergency health care services. Continuous eligibility for Medicaid/Rite Care during infancy and the early childhood years will help prevent gaps in coverage and improve access to health care.

In Rhode Island, at least **50% of babies and young children in Rhode Island** have Medicaid/Rite Care coverage -- approximately **57% of children under the age of three were enrolled in Rite Care/Medical Assistance in State Fiscal Year 2021 and 55% in 2022.**

From birth through age five, there are 14 recommended well-child preventive health care visits for routine physical and developmental screenings to identify potential developmental delays and disabilities, as well as emerging vision, hearing, dental, and physical conditions, as early as possible so that further appropriate evaluations, interventions, and treatments can be provided.

Young children have six to nine acute, short-term illnesses per year that can require a health care visit and treatment, including respiratory viruses, gastrointestinal illnesses, croup, ear infections, conjunctivitis, fevers, and skin rashes, and some young children have chronic, long-term illnesses that require frequent health care visits for evaluations, diagnosis, treatment, and management of these chronic conditions.

Benefits of Continuous Coverage for Young Children:

- **Prevents harmful short- and longer-term gaps in coverage** where beneficiaries disenroll then re-enroll. This process – called administrative churn -- can occur for several reasons including income or circumstance changes and hinders access to timely and appropriate health care services.
- **Promotes health equity** by ensuring consistent access to health care for low-income children who experience disproportionate rates of health disparities and administrative churn, particularly Children of Color.
- **Improves health status and well-being** in the short and longer-term and **supports school readiness**. Kids who don't get the right care at the right time are less likely to enter school ready to learn. Untreated vision, hearing, mental or behavioral health issues can stand in the way of thriving in the classroom.
- **Protects children and their families** from large medical bills and medical debt and **reduces additional burdens including the cost of emergency room care** that is sometimes the only option to access routine health care for children who do not have health insurance coverage. The financial protections and peace of mind for new parents whose children will have Medicaid coverage until they are school age would be a major new support for families with young children.
- **Drives more efficient health care spending**, by reducing administrative costs associated with recertification and unnecessary disenrollments and reenrollments.

National Movement towards Multi-year Continuous Coverage for Young Children

Oregon was the first state to receive approval to provide continuous Medicaid coverage for young children from birth through age 5. Just last month, Washington was the second state to join. **Other states** (New Mexico, Montana, Minnesota, Georgia, and California) are seeking to join Oregon in offering young children multi-year continuous coverage.

Rhode Island has been a leader in health coverage for children and we thank you for the leadership that the General Assembly has shown on prioritizing the health of kids, especially their access to care. Rhode Island currently ranks 4th in the nation for children with health insurance. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

