



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

Testimony Re: S-523 Stay Invested in Wavemaker
Fellowships – Early Intervention
Senate Finance Committee
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Leanne Barrett, Senior Policy Analyst



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 help babies and young children get off to the right start.

Both Rhode Island KIDS COUNT and the Right from the Start Campaign strongly support Senator Gallo’s bill, S-523, which would set aside up to 10 Wavemaker Fellowships per year for qualified applicants who are employed by certified Early Intervention agencies as speech language pathologists, occupational therapists, physical therapists, or other qualified professionals on the Wavemaker list and who are delivering services to infants and toddlers with developmental delays and disabilities.

The bill also requires prioritization of Early Intervention applicants who have demonstrated evidence of bilingual fluency in English and Spanish or English and any other high demand language.

Early Intervention is Rhode Island’s special education program for infants and toddlers with disabilities and developmental delays under Part C of the federal *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act*.

As you may remember, in [November 2021 the state established a waiting list for infants and toddlers with developmental challenges who were referred to Early Intervention](#). Early Intervention programs in Rhode Island had not received a rate increase in 20 years and were not able to recruit and retain staff for the program which meant that they could not serve all of the children who were being referred. Thanks to General Assembly leadership the state’s FY22 budget included a 45% rate increase for Early Intervention and additional *ARPA* funding to help with the staffing crisis.

The statewide waiting list grew to include over 1,500 infants and toddlers by December 2022 when the state ended the centralized referral list. Between November 2022 and February 2023, the state transferred 1,171 infants and toddlers from this state waiting list to referral lists managed by the nine certified Early Intervention programs and removed 382 children when the family declined the referral or did not respond to outreach. **Data show that the number of infants and toddlers who receive Early Intervention services dropped by 19% between 2019 and 2022.**

EOHHS is no longer able to provide regular updates on the number of children waiting for Early Intervention services in Rhode Island, but **recent reports from 8 out of the 9 EI providers indicate that there are currently**

679 infants and toddlers who have been waiting more than 45 days for services, there are 30 vacant staff positions that EI providers are struggling to fill, and there are abnormally high caseloads causing exhaustion and burnout among staff. EI providers report that clinical therapist positions (SLPs, OTs, and PTs) are the most difficult to fill and they are being outcompeted by hospitals, clinics, and school districts in recruiting and retaining staff needed to deliver *IDEA* services to infants and toddlers with developmental delays and disabilities.

Helping Early Intervention professionals pay off student loan debt is an idea that was suggested by clinicians and providers as a strategy to help EI programs recruit and retain staff. Setting aside 10 Wavemaker Fellowships, for professionals who are already on the Wavemaker list would be another important strategy to help address the staffing crisis that is causing disruptions and delays for infants and toddlers who need *IDEA* services.

Early Intervention services help infants and toddlers with developmental delays and disabilities make progress and catch up with their peers. **The sooner we can stabilize staffing and improve access to Early Intervention services, the more children will get the help they need which can improve short-term and long-term outcomes and reduce the need for long-term IDEA services.** In fact, research shows that about one-third of infants and toddlers who receive Early Intervention under Part C of IDEA no longer had a developmental delay, disability, or special education need in kindergarten.

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT thanks Senator Hanna Gallo for her leadership in sponsoring this bill and we urge passage.