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
strong support for several key elements of the proposed budget for the Rhode
Island Department of Human Services and recommend the Department of
Human Services budget include the resources needed to adequately staff the
Regional Family Centers, call center, and other service centers so that our
most vulnerable families receive the assistance they need to meet their basic
needs.

The Importance of Adequate Staffing and Working Technology
Although we have seen recent improvements in phone and in-person wait
times in application and processing Rhode Island KIDS COUNT strongly urges
the General Assembly to continue its close oversight of the implementation of
the Unified Health Infrastructure Project (UHIP) system and ensure that
adequate staffing is in place to meet the immediate needs of families. We
must ensure that lobby and call center wait times are reasonable and that
applications and renewals are processed in a timely manner. We cannot
ensure that families receive their benefits in a timely manner and get important
questions and problems resolved unless we have adequate staff to man
lobbies, phone lines, and other critical areas.

I also want to briefly reinforce our support for three key items that are part of
the Governor’s proposed FY2020 budget.

Child Care Assistance Program
Rhode Island KIDS COUNT supports the governor’s plan to allocate $700,000
to increase the tiered rates for preschoolers (children ages 3 to 5) in the Child
Care Assistance Program who are enrolled in child care centers and to
allocate $150,000 to increase and establish tiered quality rates for all children
under age 6 in family child care. Last year, the General Assembly took a
significant step forward by increasing and establishing tiered quality rates for
child care centers serving children under age 6, funded with $3.6 million in
federal resources available through the Child Care and Development Block
Grant.

The rate for infants and toddlers in 5-star centers now meets the federal
benchmark for equal access to quality, the 75th percentile of a recent market
rates study.

However, the planned rate increase for preschool children in centers still does
not meet the federal benchmark. CCAP rates for preschool children in 5-star
centers are currently $195.67/week while the federal benchmark for equal
access to quality is $230.00/week. The Governor’s proposal will get progra
closer to the federal benchmark but still not reach it. Rhode Island KIDS COUNT recommends the rate plan in Representative Diaz and Senator Crowley’s bills (H-5106 and S-282) which would increase the rate for preschoolers in 5-star centers to meet the federal benchmark for quality and include adoption of tiered quality rates for school-age children.

We strongly agree with the Governor Raimondo’s proposal to remove the requirement inserted during Governor Carcieri’s administration which prohibits state payment rates that exceed fees charged to private paying families. This requirement means that programs must raise the fees for all families in order to pull in the higher payments from the state to support quality.

**Child Care Licensing**

We support Article 4 of the Governor’s budget which would move child care licensing from the Department of Children, Youth and Families to the Department of Human Services. We have recommended this move for many years to improve efficiency and effectiveness of the child care licensing unit. As stated in Chapter 42-12, the Department of Human Services has been identified as the principal agency of the state for the planning and coordination of child care. The Department of Human Services is also the lead agency administering the federal Child Care and Development Block Grant which was reauthorized in 2014 and now includes several important requirements for state child care licensing and monitoring systems, including posting and maintaining child care licensing inspection reports on a public website for parents to access. This practice is in place in most states and is proven to improve the quality of child care available.

**Rhode Island Works**

We also support the proposal to eliminate the periodic time limit for the Rhode Island Works (RI Works) program, the state’s TANF (or welfare) program for low-income families. This program helps very low-income families meet their basic needs by providing cash assistance, SNAP benefits, health insurance, and subsidized child care to families and by providing parents with the education, training, and workforce readiness programs they need to prepare for success in the workplace.
Many parents receiving RI Works assistance have multiple barriers to employment, including limited literacy and/or English proficiency, physical and behavioral health challenges, and histories of domestic violence and/or homelessness. Thirty-one percent of parents have not completed high school, and more than one-third (37%) of those tested in English tested at or below the sixth-grade reading level, while almost two-thirds (66%) of native Spanish speakers enrolled in RI Works tested at or below the sixth-grade reading level on a Spanish-language version of the test.

The current 24-month time limit does not provide enough time for parents to prepare for entry into and success in the workforce. Rhode Island is one of only eight states that imposes a periodic time limit on its entire caseload. We urge you to repeal the state’s 24-month periodic time limit which will simplify the program and allow parents the time they need to prepare for success in our state’s workforce.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.