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Testimony Re: House Bill 5151 Article 4 Relating to Government Reorganization

Senate Finance Committee

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Rhode Island KIDS COUNT supports Section 20, 21, and 25 of Article 4 of the FY20 budget bill which would move the responsibility for licensing child care programs from the Rhode Island Department of Children, Youth, and Families to the Rhode Island Department of Human Services.

Through our work to improve access to high-quality child care and early learning programs, we have been advocating to improve the management of child care licensing for more than a decade. While there have been some improvements in recent years, Rhode Island has significant work to do to meet recommended standards for licensing and monitoring of child care programs.

Child care licensing ensures basic health and safety standards are met for children while their parents are at work. Licensing rules also provide a foundation to support quality early learning opportunities. In Rhode Island, more than 70% of children have all parents in the workforce. Many children are in child care for 9 to 10 hours a day and 5 days per week.

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 new requirements for state child care licensing and monitoring systems. Rhode Island KIDS COUNT agrees with this proposal to consolidate child care management, including licensing, with the Department of Human Services.

We make the following additional recommendations for the statute:

- In 42-12.5, change the definitions and associated language to **refer to “child care” throughout, rather than “day care.”** Since at least 1990 when the federal Child Care and Development Block grant was enacted, the correct terminology has been “child care” and not “day care.” Most leaders in the field do not use the term “day care.”

- Ensure DHS has the **authority and the resources** to make significant changes to improve child care licensing systems and monitoring. In a nutshell, the state has good written licensing regulations but poor oversight and monitoring practices. The most recent national analysis of state child care regulations and oversight, ranked Rhode Island 47 out of 50 states for oversight while we were in the top 10 for written regulations. In order to improve the health, safety, and well-being of children in child care, Rhode Island needs to improve licensing practices, including:
 - Ensure every licensed program receives **at least one unannounced inspection every year** with more frequent inspections for programs serving more children and programs that have significant compliance issues.
 - Meet national standards for the **qualifications, training, and supervision provided to licensing staff**. Hire licensing staff that have bachelor's degrees in early childhood education or a related field and provide training and supervision to licensing staff so they can fairly and accurately monitor compliance with regulations. Meet national standards for ratio of licensing staff to child care programs.
 - As required by federal law, **post and maintain 3 years of licensing inspection reports, including reports about major substantiated complaints, online** so they are readily available to parents and the public. This practice has been adopted by almost all states as research has shown that posting inspection reports on a public website improves compliance and improves the quality of care that children experience.

Thank you for considering this bill and for the opportunity to testify today.