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**Testimony Re: S-2546** Relating to Health and Safety  
– Maternal and child health services for children with  
special health care needs – **Early Intervention and  
First Connections Act**  
**Senate Finance Committee**  
**April 28, 2022**  
**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 will help families with young children.

**Both Rhode Island KIDS COUNT and the Right from the Start Campaign strongly support S-2546, which requires a 70% Medicaid rate increase to address the staffing crisis which has created a statewide waiting list for our Early Intervention program, a special education program for infants and toddlers with disabilities and developmental delays required under Part C of the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. Early Intervention programs in Rhode Island have not had a rate increase in 20 years and a received a 3% rate cut in 2009. We estimate that only about \$4 million in state revenue would be needed to match available federal Medicaid funds to implement his rate increase.**

The bill also requires a **123% Medicaid rate increase for First Connections**, the state's Child Find program required under Part C of the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. **The First Connections program has not received a rate increase in 22 years and is also facing a severe staffing shortage** which means fewer infants and toddlers with developmental challenges are being connected to Early Intervention and other services that will help them make progress and succeed in school and life. We estimate that only about \$500,000 in state revenue would be needed to match available federal Medicaid funds to implement this rate increase.

We appreciate that the Governor and the General Assembly allocated ARPA funds to EI as part of the FY22 supplemental budget and we know the Governor is proposing to use ARPA funds again for EI in FY23. **Using ARPA funds is better than nothing, but it just kicks the problem down the road and does not provide the permanent commitment to adequately fund Early Intervention services** so that Early Intervention programs are able to make permanent wage increases to attract and retain effective educators and clinicians.

**It is also important to note that zero ARPA funds have been allocated and there is no proposal in the FY23 proposed budget to help First Connections programs** attract and retain staff and provide essential services to families with newborns, infants and toddlers. According to the Department of Health, several First Connections agencies have indicated that they will terminate their First Connections services on July 1 if they do not receive a rate increase.

**We recommend this Early Intervention and First Connections bill be moved under Title 16, Chapter 24 so that the duty to adequately fund services to identify and serve infants and toddlers with developmental delays and disabilities is part of the state's education law just like it is at the federal level.**

**We hope you all will join us on May 11 from 1pm to 2pm for a Virtual Strolling Thunder rally on zoom**, featuring families with infants and toddlers from across the state supporting passage of legislation that will help all children get off to the right start. Here are stories from a couple of families that have already registered who have experience with Early Intervention.

***East Providence Mom:*** *As a foster parent that currently has a foster son in Early Intervention, I believe higher reimbursement rates are needed so staffing can be improved, and Early Intervention services can be stable and high-quality. In the five months we have had Early Intervention, I have now had three changes in providers due to staff turnover.*

***South Kingstown Mom:*** *My son and daughter have both received Early Intervention services. My son was born at 30 weeks and received services immediately upon discharge from the hospital at less than 5 lbs. Their intervention was life changing and Early Intervention needs more support to be able to provide this service to all families in need.*

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

## Early Intervention & First Connections Act 2022

[H-7628](#) (Giraldo) & [S-2546](#) (Valverde)



**Right** from the  
**Start**

Rhode Island's Early Intervention program provides special education services to infants and toddlers who have developmental delays or disabilities. Early Intervention is the front door to the state's public education system and the foundation of the special education system implemented by public schools for children from age 3 to high school graduation. Researchers have found that **about one-third of infants and toddlers who received Early Intervention no longer had a developmental delay, disability, or special education need** in kindergarten.

Under Part C of the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)* "Child Find" mandate, states must identify, locate, and evaluate all infants and toddlers with developmental delays or disabilities to determine eligibility for Early Intervention as early as possible. States must serve all eligible infants and toddlers. **Rhode Island's Child Find program is the First Connections home visiting program.**

**Rhode Island's Early Intervention program is experiencing a major financial and staffing crisis that is limiting access for infants and toddlers with developmental delays and disabilities.** The Rhode Island Early Intervention program has not received a rate increase in 20 years. In fact, Early Intervention programs received rate cuts in 2009 that have not been restored. In 2015, two agencies stopped providing Early Intervention services due to the very low rates that were not sufficient to staff the program. In 2019, a statewide survey of Early Intervention staff, showed that only 28% of staff reported high job satisfaction, 82% planned to leave their jobs if wages did not improve, and 52% had looked for another job in the past six months. **In November 2021, a statewide waiting list for Early Intervention was established.** As of April 2022, approximately 400 infants and toddlers were on the waiting list for Early Intervention.

**Rhode Island's First Connections program is also experiencing a significant financial and staffing crisis that limits services for children and families.** The First Connections program has not received a rate increase in 22 years. Several agencies that provide First Connections services plan to terminate their contract with the state due to lack of funds to adequately staff the program. **First Connections programs have an average operating loss for programs of \$136.70 per visit.** Each year, approximately 60% of all babies born in Rhode Island are identified as being at-risk for poor health and development and are referred to First Connections. In 2020, about 30% of babies received at least one visit from First Connections.

### The Early Intervention & First Connections Act will:

**1) Provide a 70% Medicaid rate increase for Early Intervention services.** This increase is needed to offer competitive wages to Early Intervention specialists (family educators, service coordinators, and licensed therapists) so the program can be adequately staffed, and the waiting list can be eliminated. We estimate that \$4 million in additional state general revenue would be needed to raise rates to this level.

**2) Provide a 123% Medicaid rate increase for First Connections services.** This increase is needed to offer competitive wages to First Connections staff (nurses, social workers, and community health workers). We estimate that \$500,000 in additional state general revenue would be needed to raise rates to this level.

“It has been incredible to see the progress our son has made across the last year! He has grown from a very shy boy at his first visit when he would not even go near our educator to hugging her at his last few meetings! We could not be more thankful for our educator’s care and LOVE for our son and our entire family! It has been a JOY to see our son’s language development progressing!”

Comment on the 2020 Rhode Island Early Intervention Family Survey

“From the start since my son was 18 months old, I believe the lack of consistency in people involved with my son’s case has caused him to not be able to get the most out of this program before he ages out. He would see the same people for a few visits and then be assigned someone new on multiple occasions for various reasons. The new people would essentially have to “start over” to get to know him, in order to help him the best way they knew how. Which would delay the progression that he could have been making.”

Comment on the 2020 Rhode Island Early Intervention Family Survey