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Testimony Re: H-7628 Relating to Health and Safety
– Maternal and child health services for children with
special health care needs – **Early Intervention and
First Connections Act**
House Finance Committee
May 12, 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 H-7628, 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.

Yesterday, we were thrilled to have House Speaker Joseph Shekarchi, Rep. Grace Diaz, Rep. Lianna Cassar, and Rep. Mary Ann Shallcross Smith join us for our Virtual Strolling Thunder Rally. **We heard from Naiommy Barret about her challenges accessing Early Intervention services for her baby Nael who has epilepsy.**

Here are additional stories from Strolling Thunder families about their experiences 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 Rep. Joshua Giraldo for his leadership in sponsoring this bill and we urge passage.