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Testimony Re: House Bill 6122, Budget Article 13, Section 5 (the Rhode Island Works Program)
Senate Finance Committee
May 27, 2021
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Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today. Rhode Island KIDS COUNT would like to thank Governor McKee for including improvements to the Rhode Island Works Program in his proposed budget for FY 22. **We support these improvements included in Section 5 of Budget Article 13.**

The Rhode Island Works Program

The goal of RI Works is to help very low-income families meet their basic needs by providing cash assistance and work supports, including employment services, food assistance, health insurance, and subsidized child care. Article 13, Section 5 would strengthen the current program by providing targeted policies that improve the economic security of families while they are enrolled in RI Works and help to improve the longer-term economic security of families as they gradually phase out of the program.

Annual children's clothing allowance

A statutory change to the children's clothing allowance would allow the Rhode Island Department of Human Services to provide the annual clothing allowance to all children, including infants and toddlers. In December 2019, 2,015 children enrolled in RI Works were infants and toddlers under the age of four. Including these children in the clothing allowance would provide relief to young families living in deep poverty.

Change to definition of dependent child

This budget article changes the definition of dependent child to repeal the requirement that an 18-year-old must graduate from high school before turning 19 or lose eligibility for benefits at 18. Instead, as long as the student is in school, she/he retains eligibility until graduation. This change would allow youth who are expected to graduate on time to stay in school and would also support youth who are on a longer trajectory to high school completion and expected to get their diploma in five or six years.

Provision to disregard earned income for six months

Finally, this budget article would allow adults in the Rhode Island Works program to work and not have their earned income count against their benefit for six months or until their family income exceeds 185% of the federal poverty level or they reach their 48-month lifetime limit. Allowing adults in the RI Works program to work and not have their earned income count against their benefit for six months would help parents receiving RI Works maintain family stability while they are moving into the workforce.

The proposed changes to the RI Works program are supported by The Raising RI Coalition, a group of community, health care, social service, and advocacy organizations that serve low-income families and are working to ensure that families can meet their basic needs.

However, this budget article does not include an important change that is included in Senate Bill 226 which includes many of the provisions in Article 13, Section 5 but which would also **increase the RI Works benefit to 50% of the federal poverty level** (\$915 per month). The maximum monthly RI Works benefit for a family of three is currently only 30% of the federal poverty level (\$554 for a family of three). This benefit amount provides \$6 per person per day and has not been increased in 30 years. Increasing the monthly benefit to 50% of the federal poverty level (\$915 for a family of three) would help very low-income families meet their basic needs. **We would strongly encourage you to include this increase in the budget.**

Senate Bill 226 would also **allow a participant who completes his/her first year at CCRI to qualify for an additional 12 months of vocational training.** Between 2019 and 2029, jobs requiring a postsecondary degree or certificate are projected to grow faster than jobs requiring less education. Allowing RI Works recipients to complete a second year of vocational training will help more RI Works recipients obtain the education they need to get and keep a job that will provide a family sustaining wage. **We would also encourage you to include this improvement to the RI Works program in the budget as it will improve the longer-term economic security of families.**

Thank you for this opportunity to testify today.

