



RHODE ISLAND KIDS COUNT

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Testimony Re: Governor's FY 2023 Revised and FY 2024 & Capital Budgets — Department of Children, Youth and Families and Office of the Child Advocate

Senate Finance Committee

March 30, 2023

Paige Clausius-Parks, Executive Director

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide this testimony. Rhode Island KIDS COUNT would like to voice its support for elements of the Governor's FY 2023 Revised and FY 2024 budgets for both the Department of Children, Youth and Families (DCYF) and the Office of the Child Advocate. These two departments provide critical supports to the most vulnerable children and families in our state, and it is important that they are adequately funded and staffed to ensure that families are supported, and children are safe.

The DCYF provider workforce is in a state of crisis due to underfunding caused by a failure to ensure rates paid to community providers keep pace with the cost of providing services. For the first time in decades, community providers have vulnerable children on waitlists delaying services due to staffing issues and turnover. This has placed our children, youth, and families who are in desperate need of services at an unacceptable disadvantage. For example, Tides Family Services, which provides critical community-based child welfare, juvenile justice and behavioral health programs for children and families throughout the state, needed to institute a waitlist for the first time in 40 years due to staffing issues and turnover. It takes a strong system of services and supports provided by both DCYF and by community providers to have the array of services families need. Being unable to accept new families into services puts the entire child welfare system at risk of collapse due to these workforce challenges.

We support the inclusion of \$7.8 million in the Governor's FY 2024 budget to accommodate a rate increase expected to result from the expiration of current contracts with DCYF's placement (foster care and congregate care) and community-based providers, which are set to expire by July 1, 2023. However, these funds will not be enough to cover the costs of wage stabilization or meet other program needs. We are thankful that the General Assembly increased rates for community providers last session, and we urge that sustainable funding be prioritized. Current budgets for placement and community-based providers are dated and do not reflect current demand. **We urge that sufficient additional funding be allocated for the impending procurement process, as well as bridge funding to continue critical workforce stabilization until the re-procurement is complete.** Bridge funding is needed to continue providing workforce stabilization after ARPA funds are no longer available after June 30, 2023.

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We are in strong support of the \$11 million in ARPA State Fiscal Recovery funds allocated in FY 2023 to expand existing in-state capacity for a 12-bed Psychiatric Residential Treatment Facility (PRTF) for female adolescents experiencing behavioral health challenges. This facility will allow vulnerable youth who have been “stuck” in more restrictive hospital-based settings to step down into less-restrictive settings with greater community-based supports at an appropriate level of care. This facility is needed to provide the full continuum of care, including prevention and community-based services.

We are in support of the \$375,000 in FY 2024 for **lead abatement and fire safety upgrades in foster homes**. Lead exposure, even at very low levels, can cause irreversible developmental damage, including reduced fetal and postnatal growth, decreased hearing, delayed puberty, poor muscle coordination, and decreased cognitive abilities. Though rare, severe lead poisoning can result in seizures, coma, and even death. Exposure to lead has been shown to decrease academic performance in early childhood. We are in strong support of initiatives by DCYF to increase placement of children in family settings/foster homes, so we believe it is critical to ensure that foster homes are safe for children and free of lead hazards.

We would like to voice our opposition to the requested increase of \$286,941 in general revenue for 3.0 FTE positions at the Rhode Island Training School. The three new FTE positions are requested to accommodate an increase in the average daily population of youth at the Rhode Island Training School to maintain staff to youth ratios. While this ratio is an important safety measure that we support, we believe reducing the number of youth who are detained or sentenced to the Rhode Island Training School would not only alleviate the burden of a staffing shortage, but would importantly prevent the incarceration of youth who could benefit from an alternative to detention. Community-based alternatives to detention achieve equal or better outcomes compared to incarceration at a far lower cost. Community-based programs that involve youth and their families and connect youth to role models, diversion programs, education, and resources prevent entry into the juvenile justice system and recidivism better than those that emphasize punishment, discipline, and consequences. **Therefore, we recommend the requested funds be reinvested into community-based agencies that provide alternatives to detention that involve restorative programming and family engagement.**

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT also supports the budget articles related to the funding of the **Office of the Child Advocate (OCA)** in their critical work on behalf of the children in the care of DCYF. We support their request for additional funds to upgrade their 10th FTE position to an educational advocate to support the increase in calls and court appointed cases sent to their office related to significant and persistent educational issues experienced by young people in out-of-home placements. We also support their request for an additional FTE that would serve as a Senior Planning and Program Development Specialist, to bring the OCA to a total of 11 FTEs. We support this additional FTE to enhance oversight of out-of-home placements including both in- and out-of-state residential placements, foster homes, and the Rhode Island Training School. This position is needed as the number of court appointed cases has increased, and the placement of youth out-of-state has remained high.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.