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**Testimony Re: House Bill 5010- School-Based Mental Health
Reimbursement
House Education Committee
February 15, 2023
Paige Clausius-Parks, Executive Director**

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today. Rhode Island KIDS COUNT would like to voice its strong support for House Bill 5010. This bill will expand provider eligibility for school-based Medicaid reimbursement to include school social workers and certified school psychologists.

On behalf of Rhode Island KIDS COUNT I would like to thank Chairman McNamara for his leadership in sponsoring this bill, and we would also like to thank the cosponsors of this bill, Representatives Shallcross Smith, Fenton-Fung, Noret, and Donovan.

There is limited mental health care capacity for children and youth. Youth that need and want mental health services struggle to get adequate, timely, and affordable care. Inaccessibility is caused by insurance-related barriers, lack of clinicians, and extremely long waitlists. These challenges were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic when some mental health programs closed temporarily.

Rhode Island needs a comprehensive continuum of mental health care for children and adolescents in Rhode Island that goes beyond high-end crisis/emergency room treatment and offers the right care at the right time in the right place. Systems connected to youth mental health needs include primary care/pediatrician offices, schools, community organizations, child welfare programs, and childcare centers. Collaboration across these sectors is crucial to ensuring that children and adolescents have access to mental health care services and support when they need it.

Importance of School-Based Mental Health Services

- Because children and youth spend a large part of their days in schools, their experiences during the school day can greatly impact their mental health. A healthy school climate helps promote and protect youth mental wellbeing and school-based mental health resources, including school-based mental health professionals, play a vital role in creating and sustaining positive school experiences and can improve health outcomes for youth.

- Beyond promoting mental wellness for all students, schools can also provide intervention and treatment for students with additional mental health needs. In the U.S., students are 21 times more likely to visit school-based health centers for mental health than community mental health centers. This is especially true in school districts in areas with a high concentration of poverty. School-based mental health services are delivered by trained mental health professionals who are employed by schools, such as school psychologists, school counselors, school social workers, and school nurses. Providing mental health services in schools removes access barriers for students (e.g., transportation, scheduling conflicts, and stigma). Schools can provide school-based services and refer youth to more intensive resources in the community when needed.

Benefits of Expanding School-Based Mental Health in Rhode Island

- Expanding the types of services and providers being reimbursed to now include social workers and school psychologists means more federal revenue to the state and more reimbursement to districts. Since most schools already deliver some of these services (and pay for them with education dollars), bringing in federal reimbursement can replace scarce education money and help stretch resources further.
- This can help ensure ongoing investment in and support for the delivery of school-based health services to students enrolled in Medicaid. It could also help schools expand the staffing needed to provide physical and behavioral health services to students.
- The *2022 Bipartisan Safer Communities Act* requires the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) to provide states with resources and guidance on how to support and expand school-based health care, including mental health services. Guidance may include best practices for payment and reimbursement of school-based services and utilization of telehealth. These provisions include \$50 million in planning grants for states.

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT supports efforts that improve school climate and provide resources to school districts that help ensure schools are safe and secure places that are conducive to learning including investment in school mental health professionals to address trauma and mental health conditions that can impact student's health and behavior at school. **A 2014 change in federal guidance allowed states to expand their school Medicaid programs and opened opportunities within Medicaid to provide a wider array of supports — including mental health supports — to a broader population of Medicaid-eligible students.** This policy change presents a unique opportunity for state education and Medicaid agencies to collaborate to draw down additional federal funds. According to a 2021 report by the Education Commission on the States, **California, Colorado, Florida, Kentucky, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Michigan, Missouri, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Mexico, and North Carolina have already updated their state plans or passed legislation to implement the rule. It is time for Rhode Island to join these other states.** With more than half (55.8%) of our children covered by Medicaid, this bill has the ability to really make a difference in access to mental health resources for our children.

Thank you for the leadership that the General Assembly has shown on addressing children's mental health and thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

