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Testimony Re: Article 5 – State Health Laboratory and Facilities Bond

Senate Finance Committee
August 18, 2020
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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 voice its strong support for Article 5 Section 3b which would provide bond funding for a new State Laboratory and facility and facilities to provide enhanced public health services including services for disease prevention and management, testing and management, and investigations to advance public health.**

Vital Testing Services Provided by State Health Laboratories

The State Health Laboratories continue rapid response to increasingly complex threats to public health, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, and keep pace with emerging scientific technologies. State Health Laboratories provide critical testing services including:

- Investigate life-threatening outbreaks of infectious disease, including COVID-19
- Ensure safety of drinking water, food, air quality, and coastal waters
- Lead screening for Rhode Island's children
- DNA testing and illegal drug identification for law enforcement
- Drug identification and toxicology to help address the opioid crisis
- Serves as Rhode Island's link to specialized CDC laboratories

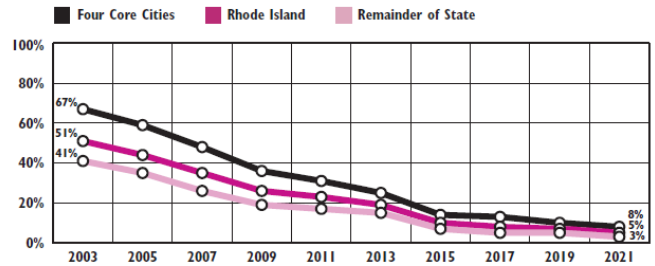
Lead Screening for Rhode Island's Children

Lead poisoning is a preventable childhood disease. Infants, toddlers, and preschool-age children are most susceptible to the toxic effects of lead because they absorb lead more readily than adults and have inherent vulnerability due to developing central nervous systems.¹ Lead exposure, even at very low levels, can cause irreversible damage, including slowed growth and development, learning disabilities, behavioral problems, and neurological damage.

The number of children with elevated blood lead levels has been steadily declining in all areas of Rhode Island over the past two decades. Compared to the remainder of the state, the core cities have more than twice the rate of children with elevated blood levels.²

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Children Entering Kindergarten with History of Elevated* Blood Lead Level Screening ($\geq 5 \mu\text{g/dL}$), Rhode Island, Four Core Cities, and Remainder of State, 2003-2021



Source: Rhode Island Department of Health, Healthy Homes and Childhood Lead Poisoning Prevention Program, Children entering kindergarten between 2003 and 2021. *Elevated blood lead level of $\geq 5 \mu\text{g/dL}$.

All Rhode Island children must have at least two blood lead screening tests by age three and annual screening through age six. Lead screening is a mandated covered health insurance benefit in Rhode Island. By the end of 2019, 75% of Rhode Island three-year-olds had received at least one blood test, 55% had received at least two blood tests, and 25% were never tested.^{3,4,5}

Conclusion

Investing in a new lab facility for Rhode Island would improve public health services for all Rhode Island children by ensuring a more efficient response to infectious disease outbreaks, such as COVID-19, and critical lead screenings. Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today

¹ Rhode Island Department of Health. (2012). *Healthy housing data book*. Retrieved February 19, 2020, from www.health.ri.gov

² Rhode Island Department of Health, Healthy Homes and Childhood Lead Poisoning Prevention Program, 2003-2019.

³ Rhode Island Department of Health. (2019). *Childhood lead poisoning prevention program referral intervention process*. Retrieved February 19, 2020, from www.health.ri.gov

⁴ Rhode Island Public Law Sections 23-24.6-7 and 23-24.6-9.

⁵Rhode Island Department of Health, KIDSNET, 2019.