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Testimony Re: House Bill 5683 Relating to Human Services- RI Works

House Finance Committee

April 8, 2021

Stephanie Geller, Deputy Director

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today. **Rhode Island KIDS COUNT strongly supports House Bill 5683** which would increase the RI Works benefit to 50% of the federal poverty level (\$915 per month for a family of three) and provide for an annual \$100 clothing allowance for qualifying children, including infants and toddlers. This bill would also 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 and would amend the work requirements for cash assistance to allow a parent to attend the Community College of RI for two years.

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. House Bill 5683 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.

Increase of the monthly benefit

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.

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.

Provision of an additional 12 months of vocational training

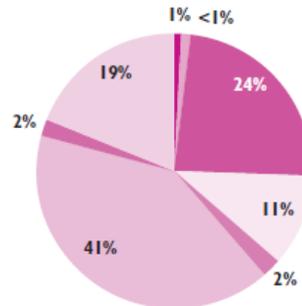
RI Works cash assistance recipients must participate in an employment plan unless they meet specific criteria for an exemption. Parents should be informed about opportunities to seek additional education or training to improve their employability prospects.



Activities of Families Enrolled in the RI Works Program, December 2019

By Type of Activity

1% (20)	Employed
<1% (5)	Work Experience
24% (363)	Education/Training
11% (162)	Job Search
2% (36)	Job/Work Readiness
41% (613)	Supportive Services
2% (23)	Teen and Family Development
19% (283)	Multiple Activities



n=1,505

Source: Rhode Island Department of Human Services, RI Bridges Database, December 2019. Percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

As of December 2019, 24% of families were participating in education or training programs. House Bill 5683 would allow a participant who completes his/her first year at CCRI to qualify for an additional 12 months of vocational training. Between 2018 and 2028, 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.

Provision to disregard earned income for six months

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.

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT urges the General Assembly to support the proposed changes to the RI Works program which are supported by The Raising RI Coalition, a group of community, healthcare, social service, and advocacy organizations that serve low-income families and are working to ensure that families can meet their basic needs.

The loss of employment in low-income households due to COVID-19 is expected to impact economic mobility and have devastating long-lasting effects on children in poverty. We encourage you to support this bill which will help improve the economic situation and employability of some of our most vulnerable children and families.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify today.