



RHODE ISLAND KIDS COUNT

ONE UNION STATION
PROVIDENCE, RHODE ISLAND 02903
401/351-9400 • 401/351-1758 (FAX)

**Testimony Re: Recommendations for How to Spend \$1.1 billion in
Federal American Rescue Plan Act Funding**

Senate Finance Committee

November 10, 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 was pleased to see the *Make It Happen* report focus on two urgent and longstanding needs that became even more apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic – the need for more affordable housing and the need for a strong behavioral health continuum of care. We were also pleased to see the Guiding Principles that were used to decide on recommended investments, including equity, sustainability, impact, and a process that reflected both broad input from impacted communities and public stakeholders, as well as solid data and research.

Housing

The Make It Happen report recommends investing \$405 million in housing, a substantial investment of *American Rescue Plan Act* funds. These recommendations are well-aligned with the Homes RI recommendations and provide a solid investment in our state’s long-term housing needs. We know that when children live in poor quality, unaffordable, or crowded housing, it has a negative impact on their physical health, development, emotional well-being, and on the family’s ability to meet children’s basic needs. And when needs are severe, families can lose their homes and become homeless. According to the Rhode Island Coalition to End Homelessness, over the past month, more than 600 people were sleeping outside, in cars, or in other places not meant for human habitation, including more than 50 families with children. It is for this reason that we also urge this Committee to prioritize investments in housing stabilization supports, such as rental subsidies, and investment in meeting the immediate, emergency needs of Rhode Islanders experiencing homelessness. Without a safe place to live, children cannot learn, play, or grow, and their parents cannot get and retain employment or provide a safe home for their families.

Behavioral Health

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT submitted a recommendation during the *Make it Happen* process on the importance of investing in a Behavioral Health Continuum of Care, starting with children. We are glad to see the emphasis on Behavioral Health in the *Make it Happen* report, in particular the goal of decreasing statewide emergency department visits by children for acute

behavioral health crises and the proposed investment of \$30 million to increase provider capacity through a loan forgiveness program, as well as stipends/bonuses to recruit and retain behavioral health professionals - and that this program should target BIPOC populations to build a culturally and linguistically diverse behavioral health workforce. Additional investments in community-based behavioral health services/workforce should also be considered.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this testimony.

