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Testimony Re: House Bill 7123, Budget Article 13, Section 1 (the Rhode Island Works Program)

House Finance Committee

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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 thank Governor McKee for including improvements to the Rhode Island Works Program in his proposed budget for FY 23. **We strongly support the improvements included in Section 1 of Budget Article 13.**

The Rhode Island Works Program

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. Article 13, Section 1 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.

Provision to increase the earnings disregard

This budget article would increase the earnings disregard for RI Works from \$170 to \$300, allowing very low-income families to keep more of their income and help parents maintain family stability while they are moving into the workforce.

Provision to increase asset limit

This budget article recommends increasing the RI Works asset limit from \$1,000 to \$5,000 so families can have savings and build a financial safety net.

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT is part of 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. This coalition also supports additional important changes to the RI Works program that are included in Senate Bill 2316. This bill would **extend the lifetime limit** for RI Works from 48 months to 60 months, **increase the RI Works benefit to 50% of the federal poverty level**, and **allow a participant who completes his/her first year at CCRI to qualify for an additional 12 months of vocational training**. 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.

We appreciate this Committee's attention to this important program that provides a valuable safety net to our state's most vulnerable children and families. Improvements made last year made a real difference to these families. **We encourage you to continue this progress and include the Governor's proposed improvements, a further increase in the monthly benefit, and other improvements to the RI Works program in**

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the budget you pass this session. These changes have been long needed and are so important for improving the long-term economic security of families. Thank you for this opportunity to testify today.