



**RHODE ISLAND KIDS COUNT**  
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**Testimony Re: Governor's FY 2023, FY 2022 Revised and Capital Budgets — Department of Children, Youth and Families and Office of the Child Advocate**  
**House Finance Committee**  
**March 23, 2022**  
**Kelsey Bala, Policy Analyst**

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide this testimony. Rhode Island KIDS COUNT would like to voice its support for elements of the Governor's FY 2022 Supplemental, and FY 2023 budgets for both the Department of Children, Youth and Families and the Office of the Child Advocate. These two departments provide critical supports to the most vulnerable children and families in our state, and it is important that they are adequately funded and staffed to ensure that families are supported, and children are safe.

**The DCYF provider workforce** is in crisis due to underfunding caused by a failure to ensure rates paid to community providers keep pace with the cost of providing services. For the first time in decades, community providers have vulnerable children on waitlists delaying services due to staffing issues and turnover. This has placed our children, youth, and families who are in desperate need of services at an unacceptable disadvantage. For example, Tides Family Services reports they have a waitlist for the first time since 1983 for critical services. Their waitlist is up to 3 months long, and they are unable to accept new families into services.

Due to low rates and the inability to attract and maintain staff, a significant strain has been placed on community-based agencies. It takes a strong system of services and supports provided by both DCYF and by community providers to have the array of services families need. We urge that more funding in DCYF's FY 2023 Budget go toward increasing rates for vital services provided by community-based agencies.

As we emerge from the pandemic and more children, youth and families need services, we support regular rate review and rate setting as proposed in Representative Casimiro's legislation that would prevent us from falling even further behind on rates compared to the actual cost of providing services. We also support the continuation of the *ARPA* workforce stabilization funding so that it continues through the end of FY 2023. Continuation of this funding is desperately needed.

We would also like to see more funding allocated for additional support for the **Voluntary Extension of Care (VEC) program and for the recruitment, support, and retention of foster families** who play such a vital role in our child welfare system.

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Within the Governor's FY 2023 budget for DCYF, Rhode Island KIDS COUNT supports the \$6 million of federal *ARPA* funds to establish at least one **psychiatric residential treatment facility for female youth** with behavioral health needs currently being served in out-of-state facilities, hospitals, and the Rhode Island Training School. This facility is needed as part of the full continuum of care including prevention and community-based services. However, we recognize that this is only a drop in the bucket compared to what is fully needed to bring all our girls who are being served in out-of-state residential placements home to Rhode Island, and it is not enough to meet the current need of psychiatric treatment for female youth throughout the state.

We are in support of the \$1.5 million in federal *ARPA* funds in the Governor's proposed FY 2023 Budget and an additional \$375,000 in FY 2024 for **lead abatement and fire safety upgrades in foster homes**. Lead exposure, even at very low levels, can cause irreversible developmental damage including reduced fetal and postnatal growth, decreased hearing, delayed puberty, poor muscle coordination, and decreased cognitive abilities. Though rare, severe lead poisoning can result in seizures, coma, and even death. Exposure to lead has been shown to decrease academic performance in early childhood. We are in strong support of initiatives by DCYF to increase placement of children in family settings/foster homes, so we believe it is critical to ensure that foster homes are safe for children in terms of lead hazards.

We support the \$28 million in FY 2022 - FY 2024 (\$16.8 million from Information Technology Fund and \$11.2 million from federal funds over 4 years) to **replace the 25-year old child welfare information system, RICHIST**, that was authorized by the General Assembly in 2021. As a data-based children's policy and advocacy organization, Rhode Island KIDS COUNT strongly supports the replacement of RICHIST. As a community partner, we also rely heavily on DCYF data to publish our annual *Rhode Island Kids Count Factbook*, including all indicators in its Safety Section, and other child welfare publications that help the state understand how children in the care of DCYF are faring and make data-informed decisions about the policies and practices that can improve child and youth outcomes.

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT also supports the budget articles related to the funding of the **Office of the Child Advocate (OCA)** in their critical work on behalf of the children in the care of DCYF. We support new state funding for two FTEs of the current 10 authorized, due to loss of federal VOCA funding for those two positions, with one of those two FTE's being an attorney.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.