



2021 LEGISLATIVE ACTION ITEMS: SUPPORTING RI FAMILIES

DHS is an agency and agent of opportunity. Our vision is that all Rhode Islanders will have the opportunity to thrive at home, work and in the community. We directly assist more than a third of our State population, from pregnant moms and the youngest residents to veterans, people with disabilities, working families, refugees, our oldest adults and everyone in between. We are committed to help lift Rhode Islanders out of poverty and food insecurity. More than 18% of children in Rhode Island are living in poverty, 8% in extreme poverty.

Working together, we will turn the keys that unlock opportunity for thousands of Rhode Islanders and help them to be successful and self-sufficient. The proposed changes summarized in this brief offer a comprehensive yet streamlined approach to ensuring reasonable and critically needed supports for the Rhode Island families and individuals who need it most. Please join us in our mission.

The great progress that the State has made must continue. We must not leave anyone behind. With everyone's help, and these investments, we will succeed.

1. IMPROVE CHILD CARE QUALITY

Quality child care is essential to the healthy development and success of our next generation, stable employment for parents, and a strong community. As we have seen during the pandemic, our child care providers are vital to our State's economy and reopening efforts. Every parent deserves the peace of mind that comes with knowing their child is safe and well-cared for. These critical measures will help further improve access and quality in child care offerings:

PROPOSED: Increase Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) rates. Every parent deserves to know their child is safe and well-cared for. DHS continues to take the lead to ensure that our reimbursement rates support quality programs and that families benefiting from CCAP have access to high-quality care.

Tiered reimbursement rates are proven to raise the quality of learning that young Rhode Islanders receive. Since the inception of tiered rates, CCAP participation in high-quality programs has increased from 8 to 20 percent. Yet our rates remain below federal recommendations.

This investment will bring base rates for all age groups (infant/toddler, preschool, and school-age) rates to the 25th percentile, and the top tier rates will remain at the 75th percentile. With this investment, more children who utilize CCAP will have access to high-quality care and more child care providers will have the resources needed to invest in their staff, facilities, and operations to deliver high-quality care. (Cost: \$6.0M Federal Funds)

PROPOSED: Child care benefits for college students. In addition, we are proposing \$200,000 for a pilot program to provide CCAP to parents attending college full time. Rhode Island is 1 of only 3 states in the country that doesn't allow low-income families attending college to qualify for child care assistance. A parent/guardian should not have to sacrifice their advanced education to maintain access to child care.



2. SUPPORT EMPLOYMENT AND FAMILY SELF-SUFFICIENCY

The Rhode Island Works program (RIW) is a financial and employment assistance program for parents and families with little to no income who have children high school age or younger. Eligible families receive financial help as well as job readiness, training and placement support, retention services, child care, transportation and educational services. More than half of participants are single parent households. Without several changes to severely outdated standards, RIW cannot accomplish the goal of preventing and remedying the worst effects of poverty.

PROPOSED: Increase support. Currently, a family of 3 only receives \$554 per month, an amount that hasn't changed in more than 40 years and has lost almost half its value due to inflation. Rhode Island is the only New England state that has not increased this benefit and it is now the lowest amount in the region. Increasing the benefit amount to 50 percent of Federal Poverty Level would allow families to pay rent and stabilize their families. Due to a decrease in participating families and spending, federal funds can pay for all of this benefit increase.

PROPOSED: Transitional stability for the newly employed. Under current law, when a parent starts a job, even a minimum wage job, they immediately lose their RI Works benefits and transportation support. In some cases, the income from the new job may not even equal the combined amount received previously from RIW and a prior job. This "financial cliff" undermines the stability of parents as they gain better employment. An "Earned Income Disregard" is a transitional support widely known as a best practice to allow vulnerable families to stabilize when they enter new employment. The statutory change would allow a parent to continue to receive the RIW cash benefit for six months unless they reach the time limit or earn 185 percent FPL (\$3,385/month for a family of 3). They also keep their transportation support, which is typically their way to get to and from employment.

PROPOSED: Clothing allowance for infants and toddlers. Current law permits a \$100 yearly clothing allowance to be provided only to children age 4 and older. We advocate a statutory change that would require the allowance to be paid to all children, including infants and toddlers age 0-3. Approximately 1,400 children would become newly eligible for the payment.

PROPOSED: High School eligibility. Statutory change would allow 18-year-olds to remain in the RI Works program if they are still enrolled in high school.

PROPOSED: Post-Secondary Student eligibility. We seek to allow post-secondary education as a full-time RIW activity during the student's second year. This is a \$0 cost change that supports parents in obtaining an associate degree.



3. FEED RHODE ISLANDERS IN NEED

The RI Food Bank's 2020 Status Report on Hunger in Rhode Island found that 1 in 4 Rhode Island households lack adequate food. The problem of food insecurity for kids existed before the pandemic; in 2017, Rhode Island had an overall food insecurity rate of 11.4%. Families of color disproportionately experience food insecurity and are more likely than white families to live in food deserts.

PROPOSED: Increase the grant to RI Food Bank to address food insecurity for our most vulnerable families. (\$175,000 GR, \$350,000 All Funds)

LEARN MORE

If you have a question about these issues and initiatives, or would like a personal briefing on our proposed solutions, please contact:

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RI DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES MISSION:

Through the compassionate delivery of critical safety net and other supportive services, the Rhode Island Department of Human Services (DHS) is committed to ensuring that individuals and families in Rhode Island have access to the supports they need to achieve their goals. Its vision is that all Rhode Islanders have the opportunity to thrive at home, work and in the community.

Photo to the left was taken pre-COVID.