

Chairman Abney  
House Finance Committee  
Rhode Island General Assembly  
82 Smith Street  
Providence, RI 02903

April 20, 2023

Dear Chairman Abney and members of the House Finance Committee,

RE: In support of Representative Giraldo H 5983

My name is Gianna Robenhymer. I live in Narragansett and am a constituent of Representative McEntee. I am here today in support of Representative Giraldo's bill to add Early Intervention professionals to the list of those that qualify for the Wavemaker Fellowship program.

I have worked as an occupational therapist at Children's Friend in their Early Intervention (EI) program for the last three years, since graduating with my master's degree. EI is a program where we provide services to babies and young children with developmental delays and disabilities.

I can tell you with absolute certainty that each and every one of my colleagues loves working with children and their families to support them in meeting their milestones and growing and developing to their fullest potential. Our team at Children's Friend is trying to hire new staff, especially therapists, but is struggling.

According to data from the BLS and EOHHS, occupational therapists working in EI in RI make approximately \$28,000 less than the average OT in the state. In addition to earning wages that are lower than I could make somewhere else, I am still paying off six-figures in student loans that I needed to take out in order to be able to do my job. Children's Friend contributes toward student loan repayment, which I am certainly grateful for, but the percentage contributed is small compared to my overall debt. I have also applied for the national loan forgiveness program, for which I am supposed to become eligible after working for Children's Friend or another non-profit for 10 years. However, loan forgiveness in that program is also not guaranteed.

The current challenge we are facing in recruiting and retaining highly qualified staff impacts the quality of services these very vulnerable children are receiving. We desperately need more professionals entering and staying in this program.

This bill will help EI professionals to feel valued in our work and encourage us to stay, as well as attract new professionals to this program. I know for me, this bill would provide significant relief. This should also be part of a larger attempt to better fund the EI system overall. I know you will hear bills later to increase rates paid to providers, and I hope you will pass that too. Our children need it. Thank you for your time.

Thank you,  
Gianna Robenhymer  
46 Canonchet Way  
Narragansett, RI 02882