

Chairman DiPalma  
Senate Finance Committee  
Rhode Island General Assembly  
82 Smith Street  
Providence, RI 02903

April 27, 2023

Dear Chairman DiPalma and members of the Senate Finance Committee,

RE: In support of Senator Gallo's bill, S 523

My name is Gianna Robenhymer. I live in Narragansett and am a constituent of Senator DiMario. I am here today in support of Senator Gallo'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 myself and 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 Bureau of Labor and Statistics and Rhode Island Executive Office of Health and Human Services, occupational therapists working in EI in Rhode Island make approximately \$28,000 less than the average occupational therapist 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.

Unfortunately, the question myself and my colleagues face becomes: "Is the passion I have for my job enough to keep me here?". Ultimately, the current challenge we are facing in recruiting and retaining highly qualified staff impacts the quality of services these very vulnerable children receive.

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. I hope this bill will be part of a greater initiative to provide adequate funding to the EI system as a whole. I know you will hear bills later to increase rates paid to providers, and I hope you will pass that too. Our children desperately need it. Thank you for your time.

Thank you,

Gianna Robenhymer  
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