

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

May 4, 2023

RE: In support of Representative Giraldo's H5810, the RI Family Home Visiting Act

Dear Chairman Abney and members of the House Finance Committee,

Hello, my name is Lea Kabbas. I live in Warwick and am a constituent of Speaker Shekarchi. I am here today in strong support of Representative Giraldo's bill which would provide the necessary rate increases for First Connection services. These rate increases are needed to help agencies like Children's Friend recruit and retain high-quality staff, who ultimately serve our most vulnerable young children in Rhode Island.

I am the supervisor of the First Connections program at Children's Friend and have been an employee for 21 years. We served over 500 families last year in this important program, but due to funding shortfalls and the resulting staffing crisis we are facing, we are worried about continuing the program.

First Connections, a newborn home visiting program funded through the Department of Health, hasn't had a permanent rate increase in 22 years. Last year, the general assembly used ARPA funds to provide a temporary rate increase which allowed us to continue to provide the services to families this year. But without a further increase, our ability to provide this service will be in jeopardy. The program costs much more than the current rates and is not sustainable without increased state funding.

First Connections connects new moms with a nurse or social worker right after she comes home from the hospital. This important program helps support mom and new baby to promote self-sufficiency and prevent child abuse and neglect. For the families with whom we work, most of whom are earning less than the federal poverty level, this program helps them start their parenting on the right foot and ensures that both mother and child can access health, mental health and early learning services that can ensure that the child is able to grow and thrive.

For the first time in the 20+ years I have been working with this program, we do not have a nurse. We have increased wages and added starting bonuses, but we are still losing staff to other professions. We urge you to invest in a permanent reimbursement rate increase so we can continue to meet our families' needs.

Thank you for your time.

Lea Kabbas
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