

An Equity Review of the Proposed FY2027 Rhode Island State Budget

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THE FOLLOWING ORGANIZATIONS JOIN TOGETHER IN SUPPORTING STATE BUDGET EQUITY LEGISLATION AND THIS EQUITY REVIEW OF THE PROPOSED FY2027 BUDGET:

ARISE

Black Lives Matter RI PAC

Center for Health + Justice Transformation

Center for Indigenous Peoples Rights

Center for Southeast Asians

Common Cause RI

DARE

Economic Progress Institute

HousingWorks RI

Jewish Alliance of Greater Rhode Island

**Jim Vincent, Former President of the NAACP
Providence Branch**

Latino Policy Institute

NASW RI

PACE RI

Parents Leading for Education Equity

Protect Our Healthcare Coalition

Real Access Motivates Progress

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT

RI ACLU

RI Black Business Association

RI Black Heritage Society

RI for Community & Justice

RI Coalition Against Domestic Violence

RI Coalition for Children and Families

RI Coalition to End Homelessness

RI Interfaith Coalition to Reduce Poverty

RI Organizing Project

RI Working Families Party

Roger Williams University School of Law

Senior Agenda Coalition of Rhode Island

SISTA Fire

The Sentencing Project

The State of Black Rhode Island Project

The Womxn Project

Tomaquag Museum

United Way of Rhode Island

Women's Fund RI

Young Voices

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BACKGROUND

Rhode Island's annual state budget is the most important piece of legislation proposed, debated, and enacted each year. The budget is a statement of our values and priorities and has been called a moral document. As residents of this state, we are obligated to understand whether the budget, in its many expenditures and investments, elevates our identified values and priorities. Our long national and local history of racial and other disparities, including the persistent racial wealth gap, has made it critical for Rhode Island to consider whether the proposed budget addresses equity across racial, ethnic, gender, disability, and other lines.

Connecticut Governor Ned Lamont included an equity evaluation of his proposed Fiscal Year 2024 and 2025 budgets put forward in February 2023, following legislation enacted in 2022. The detailed "[Ensuring Equity for All](#)" appears directly after the budget's introductory letter. Similar legislation was first proposed in Rhode Island in 2023 and in subsequent years including this session. If enacted, future budgets proposed by the governor would be accompanied by an equity evaluation.

The **Equity Impact Statement** and **Budget Equity Impact Act**, Rhode Island legislation submitted by Senator Tiara Mack (S 2989) and Representative David Morales (H 7236), like the Connecticut legislation, mandates "an explanation of the manner in which provisions of the budget further the Governor's efforts to ensure equity in the state." The explanation would consider equity in terms of "efforts, regulations, policies, programs, standards, processes and any other functions of government or principles of law and governance" seeking to do any of three things:

- "Identify and remedy past and present patterns of discrimination or inequality...and disparities in outcome"
- "Ensure that such patterns of discrimination, inequality and disparities in outcome, whether intentional or unintentional, are neither reinforced nor perpetuated"
- "Prevent the emergence and persistence of foreseeable future patterns of discrimination...or disparities in outcome"

The proposal calls for considering equity and disparities in terms of the population groups identified in Rhode Island's Fair Employment Practices statute, §28-5-7(1)(i): race or color, religion, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, disability, age, or country of ancestral origin.

This proposal is part of an omnibus bill addressing the equity impact of legislation more broadly and would also require that equity considerations be integrated into the budget development process at the agency level.

The following offers an example of an equity review for the recently proposed Rhode Island FY2027 budget. While the review seeks to address a broad array of policy issues, it is not intended as a comprehensive review of all policies or of the entire state budget.

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INTRODUCTION: AN EQUITY LENS

The opening sentences of the letter introducing the 2022 version of Governor Daniel McKee's [RI 2030 – Charting a Course for the Future of the Ocean State: A Working Document](#) call for building an equitable state and addressing long-term challenges: “As Rhode Island emerges from a once-in-a-century public health crisis, we have a once-in-a-generation opportunity to build a more resilient, prosperous, and equitable state for all. Making the most of this opportunity will require a collaborative effort to address not only the challenges caused by the pandemic, but also those that existed long before.” The document references using a “race equity lens” four times. An equity lens utilizes different perspectives to consider what policies, programs, and expenditures look like when we value and prioritize decreasing racial and other disparities and increasing equity.

As the Governor’s team begins the budget process each year, here are possible steps to ensure they use an equity lens:

Step 1: Start with the values of increasing equity, increasing and broadening economic opportunity, centering communities directly impacted historically and currently by disparities, and recognizing that disparities are not isolated but often intertwined.

Step 2: Identify data, ideally specific to Rhode Island, to describe existing and historic disparities based upon race, ethnicity, gender, age, disability status, veteran status, and more.

Step 3: Identify which policies and legislation have, intentionally or unintentionally, contributed to creating these disparities. If there is any hope of designing a budget to reduce such disparities through expenditures and programs, then we need to know how these disparities were created.

Step 4: Identify what policies and expenditures will help decrease disparities and who will be helped, as well as what unintended consequences there might be.

Step 5: Build in an assessment plan to determine if enacted policies and expenditures have narrowed disparities.

If the annual state budget is to employ an equity lens and truly function as a tool to realize our values and to increase equity, then it is critical to understand the context of systemic disparities – historical and ongoing – that frame the policy landscape and the policy and expenditure decisions policymakers must make.

The question – whether for someone assigned to design a state budget or for someone assigned to analyze a proposed budget – is what does the budget do to improve the lives of individuals and communities impacted by disparities? And, with different expenditures and programs, could it do even more?

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THE PROPOSED FY2027 BUDGET

Despite the fact that the RI 2030 working document begins with a call for equity, the [Governor's proposed FY2027 budget](#) rarely mentions equity, and neither does the administration's [Executive Summary](#) of the proposed budget or the [Media Presentation](#) that the Governor's office provided to launch the budget. Nevertheless, some of the existing expenditures and new measures in the Governor's Fiscal Year 2027 budget proposal would increase equity by investing in programs and policies that reduce disparities among different groups of Rhode Islanders. The proposed budget can be assessed through an equity lens to consider the opportunities included in and absent from the budget.

This review addresses a selection of critical policy areas along three dimensions:

- (1) The status quo, in terms of current policies/programs and ongoing expenditures;
- (2) New measures presented in the Proposed FY2027 Budget; and
- (3) Additional opportunities to be embraced.

This equity evaluation is organized according to the budget articles that correspond to the policy areas discussed. Each section connects specific topics – such as public transit, taxes, or cash assistance – to the relevant budget articles where those policies are or would be addressed. This approach reflects how the Rhode Island budget is actually written and allows the reader to more easily understand where the appropriate policies appear or would appear within the Governor's proposed FY2027 budget. A comprehensive equity review would consider all articles and their many provisions.

The evaluation is organized by budget articles, with entries on the bolded articles:

Article 1 – Relating to Making Appropriations in Support of FY 2027

Article 2 – Relating to State Funds

Article 3 – Relating to Government Reform and Reorganization

Article 4 – Relating to Debt Management Act Joint Resolutions

Article 5 – Relating to Taxes and Fees

Article 6 – Relating to Capital Development Program

Article 7 – Relating to Education

Article 8 – Relating to Medical Assistance

Article 9 – Relating to Leases

Article 10 – Relating to Health and Human Services

Article 11 – Relating to Affordability

Article 12 – Relating to Effective Date

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Article 2 – Relating to State Funds

This article addresses state funding mechanisms and special accounts, including how certain funds are allocated or distributed within the state budget for programs such as public transit.

PUBLIC TRANSIT

(1) *Status quo*: Previous estimates by the Rhode Island Transit Authority (RIPTA) had forecasted a \$39.8 million deficit for FY2027, however, the General Assembly was able to narrow this gap by allocating \$15 million through a two-cent increase on the state’s gas tax and upping the agency’s share of the state’s Highway Maintenance Account. However, these state actions were still not enough to stop sweeping service reductions. In August 2025, the RIPTA Board voted on service reductions impacting 45 out of 67 routes and reduced services by approximately 15% across the system. Under its current financial plan, the Rhode Island Public Transit Authority (RIPTA) is anticipated to face a roughly \$14 million deficit. When RIPTA’s services are poor, this disproportionately impacts low-wage workers, communities of color, people with disabilities, and senior Rhode Islanders. Since September 2025, 75% of RIPTA’s routes lost ridership when the cuts took effect.

(2) *New Measures in the Proposed FY2027 Budget*: The proposed FY2027 budget includes repealing the two-cent gas tax increase enacted in the previous fiscal year. In its place and to close the \$14 million deficit, the Governor proposes increasing funding in the Highway Maintenance Account by \$9.3 million, adding \$3.5 million in capital-plan funding for bus purchases, and adding another \$1 million in additional cruise operator fees.

(3) *Additional Opportunities*: The proposals outlined in the Governor’s proposed budget would effectively close RIPTA’s fiscal deficit. However, the plan does not restore prior service cuts, meaning the agency would remain at reduced service levels from previous years even with the new funding. To regain lost services, the state should allocate additional funding through a supplemental budget allocation. Furthermore, the state could look to expand RIPTA as a stronger public transit system has been shown to benefit the economy and would make Rhode Island more accessible for those without private vehicles.

Article 3 – Relating to Government Reform and Reorganization

This article includes administrative and operational changes to state government, including how programs are managed and implemented. It is where statutory changes related to elections administration and voting systems appear.

DEMOCRACY AND VOTING RIGHTS

(1) *Status quo*: Rhode Island funds statewide elections using General Revenue. For this purpose, the proposed FY2026 budget includes \$6 million for the Office of the Secretary of State and \$9.1 million for the state Board of Elections. In election years the allocation increases, particularly when there are statewide elections, and the allocation includes funds for the state’s system of public financing of elections. Although Rhode Island’s constitution includes a right to vote, Rhode Island elections are not as accessible as they

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could be. In 2006 Rhode Island became one of the first states to automatically restore voting rights for those convicted of felonies post-incarceration.

(2) *New Measures in the Proposed FY2027 Budget:* The proposed budget does not include any proposals or new expenditures to expand or further enhance voting rights.

(3) *Additional Opportunities:* Allowing same-day voter registration, which is available in all the New England states except Rhode Island and Massachusetts, and available in another 18 states and the District of Columbia, would increase access to voting for Rhode Islanders. Based on the experience of other states, same-day voter registration would not require a significant budgetary expenditure because Rhode Island already deploys e-poll books and ballot on demand printers, Rhode Island already processes same-day voter registration for Presidential elections, and election officials are already working on election day. Same-day registration leads to a demonstrable increase in voter turnout, particularly for Black and Latino voters. Same-day registration, as well as early voting, makes it possible for more people to vote; early voting provides for greater flexibility for those whose work schedules prevent them from making it to the polls on election day.

Article 5 – Relating to Taxes and Fees

This article contains tax policy and revenue changes that affect how Rhode Island raises money and how tax benefits are distributed. It includes policies affecting personal income tax rates, taxation of Social Security income, and tax-based supports for families and children.

CHILD TAX CREDIT

(1) *Status quo:* According to the [2025 Rhode Island KIDS COUNT Factbook](#), from 2019 to 2023, 13% of Rhode Island children – roughly 27,224 Rhode Island children – lived in households below the federal poverty line. Poverty contributes to inadequate nutrition, unstable housing, school instability, stress, and family disruption. The federal Child Tax Credit, increased temporarily during the coronavirus pandemic, resulted in a measurable decrease in child poverty – a decrease that was reversed when it expired and was not renewed by Congress. In 2022, Rhode Island provided a one-time child tax rebate using coronavirus relief funds. Rhode Island does provide a Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit, at 25% of the federal credit for childcare expenses. The state's Earned Income Tax Credit provides modest financial assistance to some Rhode Island workers with children.

(2) *New Measures in the Proposed FY2027 Budget:* The proposed budget includes a provision that would replace the existing personal exemption for children under 19 with a fully refundable state Child Tax Credit (CTC) of \$325 per child. This proposal would improve equity because the lowest-income families in Rhode Island cannot claim the personal exemption but would be able to claim the full CTC amount of \$325.

(3) *Additional Opportunities:* Research has shown that child tax credits have a demonstrable impact on well-being, including through reducing poverty. Although the budget proposal does improve equity and will provide Rhode Island's lowest-income families with additional income to cover rising costs, a larger Child Tax Credit would have an even bigger impact on child poverty rates. This year, legislation is being introduced

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which would replace the existing personal exemption for children under 19 with a fully refundable state Child Tax Credit of \$650 per child.

PERSONAL INCOME TAX RATES

(1) *Status quo*: Rhode Island's 3-bracket Personal Income Tax system, with a top rate of 5.99%, is moderately progressive, but the highest-income Rhode Islanders pay a lower percentage of income in all state and local taxes than do the lowest-income Rhode Islanders. Rhode Island is tied for fifth worst in the country for percentage paid by the lowest 20% in income (see <https://itep.org/whopays-7th-edition/>).

(2) *New Measures in the Proposed FY2027 Budget*: The proposed FY2027 budget calls for establishing a 4th tax bracket at 8.99% for taxable income above \$1 million.

(3) *Additional Opportunities*: While the millionaires tax bracket proposal makes for a good start, a similar tax on income above the Top 1% cutoff (of \$640,000 in taxable income and an average of \$772,000 total pre-tax income) would be even better. The Top 1% proposal would not only raise more revenue to fund critical programs, but because income is inequitably distributed by race and ethnicity – with Black and Latino Rhode Islanders featured disproportionately more among lower-income filers and disproportionately less among higher-income filers – it would make our state tax system fairer and more equitable in terms of race and ethnicity.

SOCIAL SECURITY INCOME TAXATION

(1) *Status quo*: Rhode Islanders with Social Security Income and of full retirement age (65 or 67, depending upon year of birth) are exempt from state taxation of their Social Security Income when a filer's overall taxable income is \$107,000 or lower, or \$133,750 or lower for joint married filers.

(2) *New Measures in the Proposed FY2027 Budget*: The FY2027 budget proposes eliminating state taxation of Social Security Income in three stages: first making those below full retirement age eligible for the exemption, then exempting half of recipients from taxation, and finally exempting all recipients.

(3) *Equity Evaluation*: The first stage of this proposal would likely increase equity, because those individuals who elect to take their Social Security benefits early likely have little other choice and need the income. Therefore, removing the age restriction would likely help lower-income seniors. However, the second and third stages would primarily benefit middle-income and high-income Rhode Islanders. According to estimates provided to the Economic Progress Institute by the Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy (ITEP), 91% of the benefit from this proposal would go to the Top 20% in income, those with total income of \$151,000 and above. Furthermore, 35% of the benefit would go to the Top 5%, and close to 7% of the benefit would go to the Top 1%. The average income of those benefiting would be \$429,300. While this proposal would certainly help many senior Rhode Islanders and so perhaps increase equity in terms of age, among this group would be millionaires, so this proposal would increase income disparities and trigger a revenue loss that could result in cuts to critical programs, possibly harming other Rhode Islanders.

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Article 6 – Relating to Capital Development Program

This article authorizes state borrowing and bond initiatives, which may fund long-term investments in infrastructure such as schools, housing, and public facilities. These investments can influence access to housing opportunities across the state.

HOUSING

(1) *Status quo*: More than a third of Rhode Island households (142,920) pay more than 30% of their income toward housing costs, making them cost burdened, and leaving less money to spend on personal needs and in support of our local economies. Of those, 44% (62,237) are severely cost burdened - paying at least half their income on housing costs—and making them housing insecure. Nearly half of the state’s renters are cost burdened, as well as more than a quarter of the state’s homeowners. There is no municipality in the state where a household earning the median homeowner income of \$112,858 can buy a home affordably. There is also no municipality in the state where a household earning the median renter income of \$48,434 can afford the average 2-bedroom apartment. These challenges disproportionately impact communities of color as homeownership rates for Black, Hispanic, and Asian households are 8-10 percentage points lower than the U.S. rates. Hispanic homeowners in particular suffer the highest rates of housing cost burden at 39%; Hispanic renter households have the second highest rate of housing cost burden at 53%. Despite recent state budget investments and a number of legislative changes to increase housing production, RI relies heavily on federal dollars for housing and homelessness programs and trails behind other New England States in per capita state spending on housing.

(2) *New Measures in the Proposed FY2027 Budget*: The Governor’s capital budget proposes a second \$120 million housing bond that, if approved by the General Assembly, will require voter approval in November 2026. Additionally, the budget includes a \$1.7 million allocation of General Revenue for three, year-round shelters.

(3) *Additional Opportunities*: If RI voters have the opportunity to approve another housing bond in Fall 2026, the state could ensure that these funds are strategically allocated to address long-standing racial and ethnic disparities in housing, including increasing Black and Latino homeownership rates. Additionally, the state could target funding to provide housing for people with disabilities in a specific number of units of affordable housing, without segregating these Rhode Islanders into a single location.

Article 7 – Relating to Education

This article includes education policy changes affecting Rhode Island K-12 and higher education systems. These policies influence educational access and outcomes across the state.

EDUCATION

(1) *Status quo*: Over the years, Rhode Island has taken several steps to ensure that all children have access to the high-quality education they need to succeed in school, career, and life. In 2010, the General Assembly

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enacted the state's first education funding formula which was based on five key principles: equity, adequacy, predictability, accountability, and efficiency. Still, in 2022, Education Trust identified Rhode Island as one of the states in which districts serving the most students of color receive less state and local revenue per student than districts serving the fewest students of color. In fact, in Rhode Island, districts serving the most students of color received \$2,583, or 13% less, combined state and local revenue per student than the districts serving the fewest students of color. Only Connecticut and Nebraska did worse on this measure. Recognizing inequities in how local revenue supports students, Rhode Island contributes 143% more state revenue to districts serving the most students of color compared to districts serving the fewest. However, even this additional infusion of state revenue does not make up for differences in local contributions.

(2) *New Measures in the Proposed FY2027 Budget:* The Governor's proposed budget increases the student success factor from 40% to 43% for high-poverty districts, including Central Falls, Newport, Pawtucket, Providence, and Woonsocket, five districts with high concentrations of child poverty, high percentages of students of color, and high percentages of Multilingual Learners. The budget also includes funds to support a 20% multiplier of the core per-pupil funding amount for each Multilingual Learner, a change that was made as of the FY2025 budget.

(3) *Additional Opportunities:* The student success factor should be increased further to meet the needs of low-income students, many of whom are students of color. The needs of students receiving special education services also are not adequately addressed in the current funding formula. Studies estimate that to close achievement gaps, states need to provide 100% to 200% more funding for students with additional needs than for students without additional needs.

Article 10 – Relating to Health and Human Services

This article includes provisions related to health and human services programs, including the coordination of human services programs.

HEALTHCARE WORKFORCE

(1) *Status quo:* Rhode Island is currently experiencing a workforce shortage in many critical areas of health care, including primary care, behavioral health care, and nursing home care – and this shortage is projected to continue. According to the Rhode Island Health and Human Services department, Rhode Island continues to experience a shortage of Certified Nursing Assistants (CNAs). CNAs play a vital role in the healthcare system by providing essential hands-on care in nursing homes, hospitals, and long-term care facilities – areas of growing concern as Rhode Island's population ages.

(2) *New Measures in the Proposed FY2027 Budget:* The proposed budget does not include any new proposals to expand or diversify the state's healthcare workforce.

(3) *Additional Opportunities:* The state should increase funding for adult education centers that provide CNA training. These centers provide accessible, community-based pathways into the healthcare field. Such

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investments will help to address the state's healthcare workforce needs and support economic mobility for communities.

RHODE ISLAND WORKS/CASH ASSISTANCE

(1) *Status quo*: Rhode Island Works is the cash benefit and workforce development program for low-income families with children under the age of 18. In 2021, the Raising RI Coalition won an increase in Rhode Island Works benefits, which had not been adjusted in 30 years. With some additional programmatic changes to the benefits framework in 2022, 2023, and 2024, the state strengthened this key program aimed at lifting children and families out of deep poverty. In 2024, the program saw a 20% increase in the cash benefit, marking a significant step towards improving equity for low-income families. However, without a cost-of-living adjustment, this benefit continues to decrease with the rate of inflation. The Rhode Island Works program continues to be funded entirely with federal Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) Block Grant funds.

(2) *New Measures in the Proposed FY2027 Budget*: The proposed FY2027 budget does not include any new measures to improve or expand the Rhode Island Works cash assistance program.

(3) *Additional Opportunities*: Rhode Island Works cash assistance benefits are 39% of the Federal Poverty Level, and without a cost-of-living increase the benefit will continue to lose value due to inflation and the rising costs of basic services. Boosting the benefit amount to 100% would lift families out of deep poverty, and it would not necessarily cost the state additional money because these benefits could be fully funded through the federal TANF block grant. From 1997 through 2009, the state steadily decreased its investment of state dollars in the program to zero, relying for well over a decade entirely on federal funding. To increase equity, the state could improve the program in the following ways: increase the benefit amount up to 100% of the Federal Poverty Level, tying the benefit to a cost-of-living adjustment, increase the child support pass-through, eliminate the benefit reduction for families living in subsidized housing, and invest General Revenue to provide Rhode Island Works benefits to eligible lawful permanent resident children and families without a five-year waiting period, which would all positively impact equity. Most of these changes could be paid for entirely with federal TANF funds, including past TANF funds being held in reserve, requiring no state General Revenue. Nevertheless, given the value of the program and its impact, additional funding would prove beneficial to improving equity and access to the Rhode Island Works program.

Article 11 – Relating to Affordability

This article includes targeted affordability initiatives intended to improve economic security for Rhode Island households. Policies in this article may include programs designed to support families and improve long-term financial stability such as baby bonds and paid family leave.

BABY BONDS

(1) *Status quo*: According to the [2024 Rhode Island Standard of Need](#) report published by the Economic Progress Institute, the poverty rate for Black Rhode Islanders (17.3%) is twice as high as the rate for White

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Rhode Islanders (8.7%), and the rate for Latino Rhode Islanders (22.6%) is over two and a half times as high as for White Rhode Islanders; the rate for Asian Rhode Islanders is 12.8%. One of the primary reasons for these stark disparities is the legacy of policies that were intentionally designed to block communities of color from generating wealth. For example, programs such as the GI Bill and Social Security have historically excluded many Black Americans, thereby deepened the racial wealth gap and perpetuated the cycle of poverty. In 2025, the Rhode Island state legislature created a legal framework for Baby Bonds for children born to a family enrolled in the Rhode Island Works program.

(2) *New Measures in the Proposed FY2027 Budget:* The proposed FY2027 budget does not include any new measures to fund or expand the Rhode Island Baby Bonds Trust.

(3) *Additional Opportunities:* While tying Baby Bonds to Rhode Island Works effectively targets some of the state's poorest residents, it significantly narrows the eligibility pool. In 2023, Connecticut launched its own Baby Bonds program, which tied the eligibility requirements to the state's Medicaid program. The state should consider allocating a sustainable revenue source to fund the Baby Bonds program which would represent a long-term, strategic investment in the upward social mobility of low-income Rhode Islanders.

CRIMINAL JUSTICE

(1) *Status quo:* Rhode Island last enacted bail reform in 2008, ending cash bail in some situations. Due to a disproportionate lack of ability to afford bail, Black Rhode Islanders spend a disproportionate amount of time in pre-trial detention. Although there might not be significant revenue impacts from bail reform, any decrease in unnecessarily detaining individuals overnight could provide some revenue savings.

(2) *New Measures in the Proposed FY2027 Budget:* The proposed budget does not include any new proposals to improve the state's cash bail system.

(3) *Additional Opportunities:* Cash bail reform, including pretrial supervised release alternatives, may cost some state revenue, but it would benefit Rhode Islanders by decreasing time spent in pretrial detention, which can disrupt their ability to make a living. These reforms would likely have a strong positive effect on Black Rhode Islanders, who have been disproportionately impacted by the current system. Overall, such reform might generate economic benefits for individuals, families, and the state.

PAID FAMILY LEAVE

(1) *Status quo:* Rhode Island became one of the first states in the nation to pass Paid Family Leave in 2013 through the Temporary Caregiver Insurance (TCI) program, part of the state's Temporary Disability Insurance (TDI) program. Since then, many other states, including neighboring Massachusetts and Connecticut, have passed more extensive paid family leave programs, which provide 12 weeks of leave and tiered/higher wage replacement rates to minimum wage workers who need time off from work (without losing their jobs) to care for a seriously ill family member or to bond with a new child. The benefit length was increased from 4 to 6 weeks over the course of two years by 2022 and from 6 to 8 weeks over the course of two years by

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2026. The benefit amount will increase to 75% of workers' average weekly wages by 2028. Rhode Island state employees and self-employed workers remain unable to access TCI.

(2) *New Measures in the Proposed FY2027 Budget:* The proposed budget does not include proposals to strengthen the state's Paid Family Leave program.

(3) *Additional Opportunities:* Rhode Island should expand TCI to provide up to 12 weeks of leave, allow caregiving leave for grandchildren and other dependents, and offer an opt-in for gig workers, sole proprietors, and the self-employed. Currently, many low-wage workers cannot afford to participate because the program replaces only a portion of their income, despite requiring their contributions. Increasing the wage replacement rate would expand access for lower-income workers, who are disproportionately women and people of color, and improve equity. Contributions could also be made more equitable by applying the payroll tax to income up to the Social Security contribution limit (\$184,500 in 2026), as most states with paid family leave do. Because the program is fully worker-funded, these changes would not impact state General Revenue.

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CONCLUSION

The examples shared in this review, although not comprehensive, show what can be accomplished when an equity lens is applied. Policymakers should use an equity lens from the start. For example, they could ask: Does Rhode Island's public transit program increase equity, and for whom? Even if yes, can it be improved to increase equity further? What policy proposals would trigger an improvement? Public transit is only one of several policy areas considered in the review and one of maybe two dozen policy areas included in the state budget and expenditures each year. Applying an equity lens will help remove systemic inequities and prevent new disparities from emerging.

Racism and sexism are embedded in our state's laws, policies, and programs. As a result – and despite decades of efforts – wage, wealth, health, and other significant gaps persist, impacting Black, Latino, Indigenous, Asian & Pacific Islander communities, and Rhode Islanders of all genders, including non-binary people. Within various racial and ethnic groups, women have often faced additional disparities in many of these policy areas; likewise, disparities experienced by women often vary by race and ethnicity. Applying an equity lens to our state budget and investing in the health and well-being, economic development, and leadership and empowerment in and across these communities, particularly by focusing on those who experience the most profound inequities, will result in a more prosperous Rhode Island.