

Testimony in Support of HB-7689
The Rhode Island Works Program
House Committee on Judiciary
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The Economic Progress Institute strongly supports Representative Handy's HB-7689, which would strengthen and sustain Rhode Island Works, the State's cash assistance program, by increasing the benefit to 100% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL) and linking benefits to inflation, restoring eligibility to Legal Permanent Residents (LPRs), increasing the child support pass-through, and removing the benefit reduction for families living in subsidized housing.

No families should be living in deep poverty in our state. Rhode Island Works is a financial and employment assistance program for parents and families with little to no income. RI Works aims to eliminate and reduce the harmful effects of poverty on families and children by fostering opportunities for economic security through cash assistance, childcare assistance, food assistance, and workforce development. RI Works provides benefits aimed at lifting families out of poverty, but right now they are not sufficient to help families meet their basic needs.

Children growing up in deep poverty often face long-standing barriers such as limited access to quality education, healthcare, and stable employment opportunities, perpetuating cycles of poverty across generations.¹ The Federal Government classifies deep poverty as families with income lower than 50% of FPL, which for a family of three is \$1,138 per month or \$13,660 per year.² Unfortunately, Rhode Island Works currently provides impoverished families with far less than that, at \$865 per month or \$10,380 per year for a family of three, which is 38% of the FPL. HB-7689 would **increase the cash benefit up to 100% of the FPL**, at \$2,277 per month or \$27,320 per year for a family of three, and tie RI Works benefits to the annual FPL cost-of-living adjustments, ensuring benefits keep pace with need. Until 2021, RI Works had not increased cash benefits in 30 years. We applaud the General Assembly for recent increases that have helped the 6,000 children receiving benefits. Unfortunately, the increases have not kept up with rising food and housing costs, highlighting the need for a cost-of-living adjustment.

Legal Permanent Residents who live and work in Rhode Island should not have to wait five years to access support that helps families achieve stability. Prior to 2007, this waiting period did not exist in RI. Since then, children and families living in deep poverty have been excluded from this critical support. Rhode Island would join 13 other states in repealing the five-year waiting period for LPRs to access RI Works. This exclusion disproportionately harms children

¹ [The Enduring Effects of Childhood Poverty, Center for Law and Social Policy, 2023](#)

² [2026 Federal Poverty Level, 2026, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services](#)

and prevents families from accessing essential state services. Providing access during this critical period promotes stability when it matters most, giving LPR children the same opportunity for security and healthy development and strengthening Rhode Island's long-term workforce and economic future.

Child support should go to children, and increasing the pass-through lets families keep more of what is meant for their kids. States can pass through child support collected to the custodial parent or guardian of families with a current RI Works case, rather than retaining the funds for state reimbursement.³ This legislation would increase the child support pass-through from the current flat \$50 per month, regardless of the number of children in the household, to \$100 per month for one child and \$200 per month for two or more children. This change would provide consistent financial support directly to single-parent households, promoting long-term stability. Currently, 18 states pass through more child support to low-income parents than Rhode Island, and seven provide the pass-through at the proposed level of \$100 for one child and \$200 for two or more children.⁴ By expanding the child support pass-through, Rhode Island has an opportunity to set the standard in New England.

Families in subsidized housing shouldn't lose benefits for staying housed, and eliminating the \$65 benefit reduction would help parents keep their children stable and secure. Safe, stable housing is foundational to children's health, development, and long-term success, and removing this penalty is an important step toward strengthening family well-being.⁵

Federal TANF funds should and could be used towards increasing the benefit amount for Rhode Island families and children living in deep poverty. Since 2010, Rhode Island has not put any General Revenue into the RI Works program, and it's now exclusively funded by the federal TANF block grant.⁶ The state has \$97 million in carryover from unspent TANF funds as of State Fiscal Year 2025, which are intended to serve the most vulnerable families.⁷

Rhode Islanders need meaningful access to economic stability and social mobility. RI Works is a critical program that helps the poorest Rhode Islanders escape cycles of poverty. Poverty is not an accident; it is a policy choice. The Economic Progress Institute strongly urges passage

³ [Understanding TANF Cost Recovery in the Child Support Program, 2024, Center on Budget and Policy Priorities](#)

⁴ [Child Support Pass-Through and Disregard Policies for Public Assistance Recipients, National Conference of State Legislatures](#)

⁵ [TANF Can Be a Critical Tool to Address Family Housing Instability and Homelessness, Center for Budget and Policy Priorities, 2022](#)

⁶ [Temporary Assistance for Needy Families and Rhode Island Works, Economic Progress Institute & Rhode Island KIDS COUNT, 2025](#)

⁷ [Caseload Estimating Conference, Rhode Island Department of Human Services, 2025](#)