



## REIMAGINING RHODE ISLAND HEALTHCARE

Making Quality, Affordable Healthcare Accessible for all Rhode Islanders

Aside from housing costs, the most pressing concern I hear from Rhode Islanders is on healthcare.

Every state's healthcare system is struggling under unprecedented federal cuts from the Trump administration, and Rhode Island is no exception. But our challenges—and our opportunities—differ from other states.

Healthcare in Rhode Island is too expensive and far too hard to access. Our healthcare workers are underpaid relative to neighboring states, and they carry enormous stress. As a result, we don't have enough doctors and nurses to cover the healthcare needs of our people.

Rhode Islanders are concerned that their primary care physician will retire and they won't be able to find a new one. It can be a challenge just to make an appointment.

Our hospital systems are fragile. Herculean efforts are required just to keep them from closing; we need a real strategy to keep them afloat.

Add to these challenges the pressures of the Trump White House and his Republican Congress cutting more than a trillion dollars from the United States' healthcare system in the Big Ugly Bill. In Rhode Island approximately one third of our population relies on Medicaid—it's the ninth-highest in the country, meaning these federal cuts will hit especially hard. In addition, this bill will cause healthcare premiums to skyrocket for so many of our families who are already being squeezed by housing costs, utilities, groceries, and gas prices. Already, about 10,000 Rhode Islanders have opted out of the state's ACA exchange this year as premiums have increased. We have to act with urgency and focus.

In my 25-year career at CVS, I learned firsthand just how difficult it is for most Americans to navigate our broken healthcare system. But I also learned that by focusing on people's needs, we can save money, improve health outcomes, and save lives. For example, under my leadership we implemented a program to ensure that every CVS customer could access the lowest price for the prescriptions, even if it wasn't through their insurance. The insurance companies didn't like it one bit, but it was the right thing to do.

In a state of one million people, we should have some of the best healthcare in the country. We should be nimble and able to adapt and innovate. Instead, because of poor leadership and burdensome regulations, it's difficult to attract the employers and healthcare workers we need to thrive. By rethinking how we can meet the health needs of all Rhode Islanders—and how we can most effectively deliver those services—our small population can be an advantage, not a disadvantage.

With this mix of challenges and opportunities facing our state's healthcare system, Rhode Island needs a governor who is an expert in the space, a leader in the field, and is passionate about delivering a healthcare system where all Rhode Islanders can get an appointment to see a doctor when they're sick, can afford to go to the hospital in an emergency, and can live happy, healthy lives.

I look forward to being that governor.

— Helena



## PROTECT AND STRENGTHEN MEDICAID

Medicaid covers nearly half of all births in [Rhode Island](#) and almost two-thirds of nursing home residents; over 300,000 adults and children are covered. But inadequate reimbursement rates and Trump administration actions are putting pressure on hospitals and families alike. We need to take action as a state to not only protect Medicaid, but to strengthen it.

### Raise Medicaid Reimbursement Rates

Notwithstanding recent measures to increase Medicaid reimbursement rates for [certain services](#) and to [bring those rates in line](#) with Medicare rates for primary care services—Rhode Island [ranked dead last](#) in 2024 in Medicaid rates compared to Medicare rates—hospitals and the entire healthcare system continue to feel the strain from rates as [much as 30% lower](#) than those in neighboring states.

- **Increase reimbursement rates to increase competitiveness.** We need more than a [band-aid](#) to address reimbursement rate issues. Increasing Medicaid rates for primary care services and mental health services is progress, but we need to further increase rates to narrow the gap with Massachusetts and Connecticut while drawing down more federal dollars from the Trump administration.
- **Work to bring commercial insurers along as well.** Less than half of Rhode Island's population is publicly insured. If we truly want to address this issue, we need to bring commercial insurers into the mix by providing incentives for them to take similar action in improving reimbursement rates, particularly for primary care services.

### Keep Eligible Rhode Islanders Covered

Donald Trump's [assault on working people](#) could result in [tens of thousands](#) of Rhode Islanders not having Medicaid coverage. But despite massive cuts in federal funding, we cannot afford to sit idly by while families lose health insurance and our entire healthcare system suffers. By taking a proactive approach and using proven models that really work—[like those I used at CVS](#)—we can keep more Rhode Islanders covered and save money for Rhode Island in the process.

- **Keep Rhode Islanders insured and address eligibility gaps.** Create a state-funded navigator program modeled off of the ACA program to keep Rhode Islanders covered, reduce the number of Rhode Islanders who lose their coverage, and address Medicaid eligibility gaps, preserving health insurance for those who need it and bringing in millions of federal matching dollars.
- **Work with community partners while ensuring accountability.** Engage local community leaders and existing health programs to meet people where they are, partnering with the private sector and nonprofits while implementing strong accountability measures to ensure Rhode Island is getting a strong return on investment and avoiding waste, fraud, and abuse within the state Medicaid program.

### Work to Drive Down Costs

Most Rhode Islanders don't need to see the latest reports to know what is patently obvious—[healthcare costs have gone up](#), and they are putting a strain on more and more Rhode Island families. Out-of-pocket spending has shot up in recent years, to over \$2,500 in 2024, while overall healthcare expenditures in the state have similarly increased, by over 9% in 2024, well above the target rate of 4%. The only way we can afford to increase Medicaid reimbursement rates and strengthen our healthcare system from top to bottom is if we get serious about cost drivers, accountability, and transparency.



## BOOST RHODE ISLAND'S HEALTHCARE WORKFORCE

Rhode Island is losing providers of all kinds, and we are doing so at a time when hundreds of thousands of Rhode Islanders lack a [primary care clinician](#) and the state is short several hundred primary care doctors. We need to make Rhode Island the most attractive state for doctors and nurses to pursue their careers.

### Allow for Efficient and Effective Healthcare Delivery

We should always be looking for the most efficient and effective way for the delivery of healthcare services—and for healthcare providers to do the job they were trained to do.

- **Allow providers to operate at the top of their license.** Rhode Island is ahead of the curve already when it comes to allowing physician assistants and nurses to practice with greater autonomy and provide medical care without needless restrictions, but the state can do more to enable all providers to operate at the top of their license. For example, PAs in Rhode Island are limited in their [scope of practice](#) by the expertise of their supervising physician, while some states allow PAs to provide any services within their own competency and education, training, and experience.
- **Make it easier for providers to do their job.** We saw during the Covid-19 pandemic that easing certain restrictions on the provision of care allowed providers to more efficiently meet the needs of patients, without them being harmed. Rhode Island should make permanent commonsense changes that increase flexibility for providers and access to care for patients.

### Grow Our Healthcare Provider Workforce

Whether we're attracting more healthcare providers from neighboring states or training more providers right here in Rhode Island, we need to be proactive in finding ways to increase our workforce in both the short term and long term to meet the healthcare needs of our state.

- **Expedite licensing for all providers.** Rhode Island is one of just 10 states nationwide that has [not yet implemented](#) the Interstate Medical Licensure Compact (IMLC), despite passing legislation to join the compact in 2022. (We are part of the Nurse Licensure Compact, but not the PA Licensure Compact.) Rhode Island should do all it can to make it easier, simpler, and hassle-free for all providers to get licensed and begin practicing, whether moving to the Ocean State from another part of the country or internationally.
- **Expand loan forgiveness programs for providers committed to Rhode Island.** While providing funding for [URI's medical school](#) will undoubtedly help in the long run, we also need to fund solutions that will address workforce shortages immediately. Rhode Island should significantly increase state funding for loan forgiveness programs, like the Wavemaker Fellowship, that make it feasible for future providers who choose to practice in Rhode Island after completing their training to afford their education. Our state remains short by [hundreds of primary care providers](#). By scaling up state loan forgiveness programs, we will aim to increase the number of PCPs in the state by 300 over the next eight years, far more than the 4–8 doctors the governor funded in the current budget, the first funding since 2008.
- **Invest in Rhode Island's education pipeline.** URI is one of the state's crown jewels—but Rhode Island remains [one of just two states](#) without a state-funded medical school. The fact that we are starting today gives Rhode Island the opportunity to learn from other states and be innovative in designing our medical school. We should bring an entrepreneurial mindset to the development of the program in order to start more quickly and take advantage of what other schools have already learned. We should also ensure that healthcare occupations are included in expanded career and technical education (CTE) investments and classroom-to-career programs.



- **Make it easier, not harder, for international providers to work here.** Physicians from other countries make up roughly [a quarter of all doctors](#) in the United States, but the Trump administration has made it more difficult for them to get visas and work in Rhode Island and elsewhere. At the same time, the Trump administration has sought to end Temporary Protected Status (T.P.S.) for more than a [dozen countries](#). Refugees and immigrants play essential roles in our healthcare system, serving not just as doctors but as physician assistants, pharmacists, nurses, and more. We need to protect programs that protect the people whose hard work keeps our hospitals functioning.

## Support Healthcare Providers

We cannot have a successful healthcare system if we don't set up our healthcare providers for success. That means not only training and hiring talented, hardworking individuals, but also ensuring they are safe and secure in their jobs; making it easier for them to actually get to the places they work; and addressing the affordability crisis in housing and raising a family.

- **Create a healthcare worker bill of rights.** The Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated an issue that has long existed—the safety and well-being of dedicated healthcare workers, across medical settings. Too often, workers are made to feel uncomfortable, vulnerable, and unsafe in the workplace—all while providing essential healthcare services to those in need. Rhode Island should develop a healthcare worker bill of rights to support providers' safety and ensure that we don't needlessly lose healthcare workers due to safety concerns.
- **Make it easier for healthcare workers to get to work.** We need to invest in job-access routes statewide to connect workers to hospital campuses and other medical settings that currently lack consistent RIPTA service. RIPTA currently has a funding gap of millions of dollars annually, yet we know that targeted public transportation investments can significantly increase its usage while supporting good-paying jobs in the process.
- **Make childcare and housing more affordable.** Workers across all industries cannot do their jobs if they can't afford to live near them or take care of their children while they're at work. We need to create an employer-matched childcare fund to reduce the cost of care for healthcare workers, and expand tax credits for childcare assistance. We also need to spur the construction of tens of thousands of new homes and apartments statewide.

## BRING CARE TO THE COMMUNITY

Rhode Island is among the oldest states in the nation, which means more chronic disease, higher healthcare costs, growing demand for senior services, and increased accessibility needs for health services. By working to bring care into the community—particularly preventative care—we can save lives and save tax dollars in the process.

### Work with the Community to Tackle Chronic Disease

It is not only better for patients but also significantly cheaper if we identify and treat chronic conditions such as diabetes early on, before they progress to requiring costly hospital care. An estimated [105,000 Rhode Island adults](#), or around 12% of the adult population, have been diagnosed with diabetes—and many more are living undiagnosed or are prediabetic. Rhode Island must do more to tackle these chronic diseases that do so much harm if left ignored.



- **Tackle diabetes with community screening and early detection.** Making investments that help keep untreated chronic diseases, especially diabetes, from progressing will save the state money overall. We need to implement a community-wide approach to early detection, with a robust system to follow up with patients, connect them with preventive health services, and track outcomes. While fundamental lifestyle changes are difficult to implement, they ultimately result in incredible savings and better health outcomes for Rhode Islanders.
- **Invest in community screening and early detection of chronic diseases.** Rhode Island's small size makes it a perfect fit for taking an innovative approach to addressing the challenges of chronic disease, including Alzheimer's, before they have time to progress. States like California are at the forefront of adopting new methods of [testing and diagnosing](#) diseases. Rhode Island should invest in becoming a learning lab for tackling these issues.
- **Increase primary care spending.** A review of state reimbursement rates for primary care providers will be released [later this year](#), and the state has taken some steps toward increasing reimbursement rates for primary care services covered by Medicaid. But Rhode Island can do more to emphasize the importance of primary care services to the overall healthcare system for patients, providers, and insurers. OHIC's goal of 10% of health plans' medical expenses going toward primary care by the end of 2028 is a step in the right direction—currently, [less than 5% does](#)—but the state should follow the lead of other states that have required even higher spending thresholds for insurers.

## Expand Access to Health Services

The easier it is to access health services of all kinds—primary care, mental healthcare, behavioral health services, and others—the more likely it is that the Rhode Islanders who need care will actually get the help they need.

- **Transform rural healthcare.** Rhode Island [recently announced](#) it had received \$156 million in federal funding for rural healthcare over five years, but the current administration's plans for the funding spread it across nine different priorities. If we split this funding across too many issues, no matter how important, we could end up with very little to show for it. We need to target this funding where it is needed most, which is expanding access to primary care services in small towns across the state. Sen. Bernie Sanders' advocacy for FQHCs has been pivotal to essential health centers like Thundermist in Rhode Island over the years. We should invest every dollar from the Trump administration in building off that work to get more Rhode Islanders the care they need.
- **Expand school-based behavioral and mental health services.** Reports from parents and educators are clear—Rhode Island children are struggling, and we are failing as a state to meet their needs. [More than half](#) of children who need mental health treatment or counseling face barriers to obtaining that care. We need to work with elementary and secondary school systems to expand on successful school-based behavioral and mental health service programs, while also increasing funding for [telehealth services](#) for children. Wraparound schools can not only improve student well-being but also help reduce the school-to-prison pipeline and help students achieve greater academic success. Rhode Island already has a nation-leading asset in this fight: Bradley Hospital, the country's first and only psychiatric hospital exclusively for children, whose crisis line and community programs have helped give Rhode Island the lowest adolescent suicide rate in the nation. The state should partner with Bradley to expand its school-based, in-home and telehealth programs and bring more of that care directly into Rhode Island communities.



- **Invest in healthy kids and healthy schools.** Rhode Island dropped behind every other New England state in terms of [children's well-being](#) in 2025, and was barely in the top 20 states nationwide, in large part due to financial instability, as well as other challenges. Rhode Island should fund universal school breakfast and lunch for all children regardless of income, so that all of our kids have access to healthy food on a daily basis. We also know that access to recommended vaccinations for children can have a huge impact on children's well-being; we should work to improve education about vaccines so that parents can keep their children protected.
- **Increase access to dental care.** The data is clear: untreated dental issues can lead to a myriad of other health issues and increase the cost of care for everyone. While we will need federal support to fully expand dental coverage to all public plans, we must do everything we can to expand access to dental care for those on public plans in Rhode Island.

## Support Seniors and Caregivers

Almost a quarter of Rhode Island adults, or more than [200,000 individuals](#), provide care for a friend or family member; 70% of those individuals have worked while caregiving, and more than a quarter are part of the “sandwich generation,” who care for a parent while also raising a child.

- **Advocate for location-agnostic solutions to caregiver shortages.** If caring for someone at home costs less than in a nursing facility, that care should be reimbursed. The last thing our healthcare system needs is for care to default to the most expensive settings when more affordable solutions are available. But our reliance on at-home and family caregivers must come with sufficient supports, including the expansion of eligibility for Temporary Caregiver Insurance (TCI) and the provision of mental health and peer support for caregivers in all settings.
- **Combat senior isolation and loneliness.** Loneliness among Americans of all ages is a [public health crisis](#), but it is particularly acute among older Americans, as participation in community groups, volunteering, and religious services has declined sharply. The state should pursue creative ways to combat this epidemic, including by working with senior centers and community groups to make it easier for older Rhode Islanders to connect with work, volunteer, and social opportunities in their communities.

