



2021 Legislative Outcomes

During the 2021 Legislative Session, MHARI fought hard to pass dozens of pieces of legislation aimed at improving mental healthcare across Rhode Island.

We had many victories, including expanding access to telemedicine beyond the pandemic, funding affordable housing, and increasing suicide awareness efforts in schools. These accomplishments are a testament to the hard work and the support of our Rhode Island community.

Alongside our successes, however, this session also brought some disappointments. Our legislation calling for increased provider reimbursement rates, as well as our efforts to codify the Affordable Care Act into Rhode Island law, both stalled in the House of Representatives. We will continue to fight for these essential policies, among others, with a renewed sense of drive for improving mental healthcare in Rhode Island during the 2022 Legislative Session next year.

What follows below is an update on where key pieces of legislation landed. You can see how many good bills became law this year, and which policies we will continue to advocate for next session.

Bills Signed into Law

Housing

- The **State Budget** establishes a five-year pilot program to create permanent supportive housing for 125 chronically homeless Rhode Islanders. It also authorized the designation of a “housing czar” to oversee housing initiatives and develop housing plans for the state.

- **Budget Article 16** creates a permanent funding stream in the State Budget for affordable housing in the state.
- **H-5257 Sub A** sponsored by Representative Anastasia Williams prohibits landlords from discriminating against tenants with lawful sources of income like SSI or SSDI benefits, housing vouchers, and alimony.

Civil Rights

- **H 5763** and **S-003 Sub A** sponsored by Representative Katherine Kazarian and Senator Joshua Miller, respectively, now prohibits insurers from charging women higher insurance premiums than men of similar age.
- **H-5741** and **S-0755** sponsored by Representative Edwards and Senator Murray, respectively, makes single-user restrooms in public places non-gender specific in a step support building safer spaces for transgender Rhode Islanders.
- **H-5394** and **S-0056** sponsored by Representative Cortvriend and Senator DiPalma, respectively, precludes a parent's disability from serving as the sole basis for the state to institute an investigation of the disabled parent's family.

School Mental Health

- **H-5353** and **S-0031** sponsored by Representative Cortvriend and Senator Seveney, respectively, creates the Nathan Bruno and Jason Flatt Act, which requires all public school districts to adopt suicide prevention policies and train all personnel in suicide awareness and prevention annually.

Telemedicine

- **H-6032 Sub A2** and **S-004 Sub A2** sponsored by Representative Casey and Senator Miller, respectively, makes insurance coverage for telemedicine permanent. It ensures that behavioral health providers will be reimbursed equally for telemedicine appointments and in-person office visits, and requires that insurers cover audio-only (telephone) appointments the same as video conferencing appointments.

Harm Reduction

- **H-5245A** and **S-0016A** sponsored by Rep. Edwards and Sen. Miller, respectively authorizes a two-year pilot program to prevent drug overdoses through the establishment of harm reduction centers, which are a community-based resource for health screening, disease prevention and recovery assistance where persons may safely consume pre-obtained substances.

Bills We Will Continue to Advocate for in 2022

Outpatient Behavioral Health Provider Reimbursement Rates

- **S-591, H-5546, and H-6268** sponsored by Senator Joshua Miller, Representative Craven., and Representative Tanzi, respectively, is MHARI's legislation to increase reimbursement rates to behavioral health providers.
 - In Rhode Island, research shows that outpatient behavioral health providers are reimbursed 23.4% less than their counterparts on the medical side of plans. This violates mental health parity laws. Rhode Island has a shortage of outpatient providers, and this means that patients must go on long waitlists to see an expert, or go out of network. Increasing reimbursement rates would incentivize more providers to participate in insurance networks, thus making it easier for people to get treatment and support when they need it.
 - Status: S-591 passed the Senate but H-5546 stalled in the House Health and Human Services Committee and H-6268 stalled in the House Finance Committee.

Consumer Protections in Health Insurance

- **H-5441** and **S-005 Sub A** sponsored by Rep. June Speakman and Sen. Joshua Miller, respectively, prohibits insurers from denying coverage to people with pre-existing conditions.
 - The bills guarantee 10 essential health benefits including behavioral healthcare; it guarantees free preventative services like mammograms and colonoscopies. Right now, these protections are guaranteed in the Affordable Care Act (ACA). If the U.S. Supreme

Court overturns the ACA, Rhode Islanders will lose these protections unless we codify them into state law.

- Status: S-005 Sub A passed the Senate but H-5441 stalled in the House Health and Human Services Committee.
- **H-5843** and **H-5651** sponsored by Rep. Rebecca Kislak and Rep. Maryellen Goodwin, respectively, prohibits insurers from setting annual and lifetime limits on insurance coverage.
 - Right now, these protections are guaranteed in the Affordable Care Act (ACA). If the U.S. Supreme Court overturns the ACA, Rhode Islanders will lose these protections unless we codify them into state law.
 - Status: the bills stalled in the House Health and Human Services Committee.

Revenue for RI

- **H-5227** and **S-326** sponsored by Rep. Alzate and Sen. Murray, respectively.
 - These bills create an additional tax bracket for Rhode Island's wealthiest 1% to generate \$128 million in new revenue.
 - Status: the bills stalled in the Senate Finance Committee and House Finance Committee.

Mental Health Treatment Court

- **H-6025** and **S-678** sponsored by Rep. McEntee and Sen. McCaffrey, respectively.
 - These bills create within the district court a dedicated calendar offering treatment and sentencing alternatives to eligible defendants deemed to suffer from serious and persistent mental illness to be known as the "Mental Health Treatment Calendar."
 - Status: the bills stalled in the House Finance Committee and Senate Judiciary Committee.

School Mental Health

- **H-5067** sponsored by Rep. McNamara directs that services provided by school social workers and certified school psychologists would be included as health care related services eligible for federal Medicaid reimbursement.

- Status: the bill passed the House Floor but was not heard in any Senate Committees.
- **H-5936** and **S-179** sponsored by Rep. Ranglin-Vassell and Sen. Bell, respectively. These bills establish the implementation of trauma-informed practices in schools throughout the state.
 - Status: this bill stalled in the House Education Committee and Senate Judiciary Committee.