

An Act Relating to Business and Professions - Opticians
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Support

Background & Intent

Rhode Island is one of **20 States** nationally that require Opticians to hold Licensing issued by its' respective Health Regulatory Department. Opticianry is enforced this way to set minimum standards that safeguard the making and verification of Prescription Eyewear for the sole purpose of promoting the public health interests of Rhode Island consumers .

Of these 20 Licensed States, **18** have a ***secondary path*** to attain an Optician License via an ***approved Apprenticeship*** as an alternative to a post-graduate Opticianry degree requirement. Said Apprenticeships are held to rigorous National & State-Specific standards which are often set by partnership between the Public Health Department & Opticianry Advisory Board for said State(s).

Neighboring States to RI that require Licensure (Vermont, Massachusetts, Connecticut, New York & New Jersey) all have an Apprenticeship pathway, but unfortunately, RI does not.

Currently, an applicant seeking Licensure as an Optician in RI must complete an approved two-year Opticianry degree program, yet RI currently does not have an in-state Opticianry degree program. Applicants would need to either travel to Benjamin Franklin Institute of Technology (Boston) or Middlesex Community College (Middletown, CT) to attain their degree, or work in either CT or MA as an Apprentice Optician, and work to gain their License in RI via reciprocity.

Without an in-state path to gain Optician licensure, many retailers, both small and big business, will find a barrier to hiring experienced and trained Opticians to meet the future needs of RI constituents in need of prescription eyewear, potentially creating a barrier to creating new business.

The expected eyeglass-wearing populations is poised to grow rapidly, "***According to projections based on the most recent census data and studies funded by the National Eye Institute, a division of the National Institutes of Health, the number of people having visual impairment or blindness in the United States is predicted to double to more than 8 million by 2050, with the youngest of the baby boomers turning 65 by 2029.***" (<https://www.globenewswire.com/news-release/2022/08/18/2500658/0/en/The-Global-Prescription-Lens-Market-size-is-expected-to-reach-63-8-billion-by-2028-rising-at-a-market-growth-of-5-4-CAGR-during-the-forecast-period.html>)

In order to meet the demands and needs of the current workforce and future applicants, The Opticians Association of RI is asking for a ***secondary path via Apprenticeship*** to be included in Licensure Qualifications as an ***amendment to current RI Gen Law 5-35.2-2:***

- ***Gen. Laws § 5-35.2-2. Qualification of optician applicants.***

(a) ***Every applicant for licensure shall present satisfactory evidence, in the form of affidavits properly sworn to, that he or she:***

(1) ***Is of good moral character; and***

(2) Has graduated from a two-year (2) school of opticianry approved by the New England Association of Schools and Colleges or an equivalent regional accrediting authority or other accrediting authority as may be approved by the department with consultation from the advisory committee; and/or

- *Has successfully completed an Apprenticeship Program registered in accordance with RI GL 28-45, of not less than four thousand one hundred (4,100) hours in not less than two (2) years pursuant to meeting approval of applicable requirements of this section;*
- *(3) Has successfully passed the national opticianry competency examination or any other written examination approved by the department with consultation from the advisory committee; and*

(4) Has successfully passed a practical examination approved by the department with consultation from the advisory committee.

We believe that we need to reinstate the Opticianry Program at CCRI to ensure applicants for Licensure that are not employed or engaged in the Optometry field will have a path to gain interest in and pursue a career as a Licensed Optician. We also believe that an alternative Licensure path via an Apprenticeship Program in RI will not only add jobs to a growing industry, but give many constituents working in Optometry-related fields an opportunity to pursue fruitful career paths that meet the public health and consumer demands of Rhode Islanders. An Apprenticeship will ensure that RI continues to meet the public health demands of its' constituents and further new business opportunity in the State, while working to reinstate the CCRI, or another institution's, Opticianry Degree Program.

The Apprenticeship Program would be created in conjunction with RI DLT, who would collaborate with the RI Optician Advisory Board & RIDOH, and include many of the same standards as set forth by our neighboring states' programs (MA, CT) to ensure the best candidates for Optician Licensure are produced to protect the public health interests of RI constituents. An applicant would be required to be mentored by either a Licensed Optician, Optometrist or Ophthalmologist who would be required to sign off on said applicant's progress in a department-approved Apprenticeship as a requirement for Licensure.