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TESTIMONY OF THE OFFICE OF THE PUBLIC DEFENDER REGARDING:

House Bill No: HB5643

**ENTITLED, AN ACT RELATING TO STATE AFFAIRS AND GOVERNMENT –
CASINO GAMES**

Chairman Craven and Member of the House Judiciary Committee:

The Office of the Public Defender has concerns with HB5643, which seeks to amend Casino Gaming Crimes to align with the recent approval of iGaming. While we understand the need to regulate online gambling activities, our primary concern lies with the proposed creation of a new misdemeanor for iGaming for individuals between the ages of 18 and 20.

It is crucial to note that the legal gambling age in Rhode Island is currently set at 18 for all other purposes. Although the iGaming statute has set the age requirement at 21, introducing a separate misdemeanor for iGaming for 18- to 20-year-olds may lead to issues related to notice and compliance. This discrepancy could result in confusion for individuals within this age range, making it difficult for them to navigate the legal framework effectively.

Rather than criminalizing digital gambling for individuals aged 18 to 20, we suggest considering alternative measures that focus on education and harm reduction, such as punishing such conduct as a civil offense with a required education component on problem gambling. Enhancing public awareness about responsible gambling practices and providing resources for those at risk could be more effective in addressing potential issues without resorting to criminalization.

We appreciate your attention to these concerns and urge you to reconsider the proposed amendments in HB5643.

Sincerely,



Megan F. Jackson

Legislative Liaison

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