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ACLU OF RI POSITION: SUPPORT

TESTIMONY ON 24-H 7386, RELATING TO LIBRARIES – STATE AID TO LIBRARIES – FREEDOM TO READ February 29, 2024

As an organization that enthusiastically supports the role of libraries in a democratic society, as well as the core First Amendment right of intellectual freedom – including the right to read anything that an individual chooses to – the ACLU of Rhode Island is glad to provide support for this legislation which seeks to validate the responsibility of government to protect the freedom of libraries and librarians to fulfill their mission without fear of censorship. In light of widespread, troubling campaigns across the country seeking to limit access to reading material and to attack the public institutions that provide it, we believe it is critical for Rhode Island to show its support for legislation that rebuffs any calls for book banning.

We note two further points of relevance. First, we also urge committee members to keep in mind and support a companion bill pending in House Judiciary Committee, 23-H 7575, introduced by Representative Morales, which proactively would protect librarians and teachers from prosecution under our state obscenity laws. This is a very specific and important safeguard that most other states have, but that Rhode Island lacks. Second, while this legislation declares that materials should not be removed from libraries based on “partisan or doctrinal disapproval,” it is also important to ensure, as subsection (c) of this bill does, that librarians retain the discretion to deaccession materials as appropriate in their professional judgment without constantly being subject to unwarranted attacks in making those judgments.

We are extremely pleased that this bill places a spotlight on the dangers facing the freedom to read and highlights the role of libraries in providing “equitable access to information for all citizens.” Its passage would put Rhode Island on record in expressing its opposition to the current censorial climate sweeping the country. For these reasons, we support passage of this bill. Thank you for your consideration.