



March 25, 2025

Representative Evan P. Shanley, Chair

House State Government and Elections Committee

Rhode Island State House

Providence, Rhode Island 02903

RE: Testimony in Support of House Bill 5874 - An Act Relating to Elections - Voting

On behalf of United Way of Rhode Island, we proudly support House Bill 5874, which advances equity and social justice for all Rhode Islanders. Through the **ADVOCATE UNITED** initiative of our **LIVE UNITED 2025** Strategic Plan, we are dedicated to breaking down systemic barriers and championing policies that advance racial, social, and economic justice in every community. House Bill 5874 is crucial to building a more democratically inclusive Rhode Island. It guarantees equal opportunities to the ballot for all individuals, regardless of race, background, or socioeconomic status. By supporting civic engagement, this legislation tackles disparities in housing, education, employment, and criminal justice, strengthening the state's dedication to equity and fairness.

Currently, individuals who are incarcerated pretrial or serving sentences for misdemeanors retain their right to vote under Rhode Island law. However, logistical barriers - such as lack of information, difficulties in voter registration, and challenges in accessing mail-in ballots - often prevent them from exercising this right. These barriers disproportionately impact communities of color, exacerbating racial inequities in civic engagement. House Bill 5874 addresses these challenges by creating a voting coordinator within the department of corrections to facilitate the education, registration, ballot request, and ballot submission for individuals eligible to vote. By creating this role, responsibility is consolidated into a Department of Corrections employee who will be supported by the Secretary of State. The identification of this individual also supports accountability measures outlined in the enforcement mechanism of this bill.

At United Way of Rhode Island, we recognize that advancing racial justice requires addressing systemic inequities in all aspects of society, including our electoral system. We know that when individuals are empowered to participate in civic life, our communities become stronger, more representative, and more just. Expanding access to the ballot box for eligible incarcerated individuals is a critical step toward a more equitable democracy.

Uniting our community and resources to build racial equity and opportunities for all Rhode Islanders

Equity is the foundation of a just society. Supporting House Bill 5874 will help ensure that all Rhode Islanders have a fair and equal opportunity to build the community we share. This legislation is vital to creating a more inclusive and just Rhode Island where everyone can thrive. We strongly encourage your support in advancing policies that uphold racial and social justice.

Sincerely,

Peggy Desjarlais

Housing and Economic Development Policy, United Way of Rhode Island

Uniting our community and resources to build racial equity and opportunities for all Rhode Islanders

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