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ACLU OF RI POSITION: SUPPORT

TESTIMONY ON 25-H 5726, RELATING TO LIBRARIES – THE FREEDOM TO READ ACT April 3, 2025

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 of individuals to read anything they choose to – the ACLU of Rhode Island is pleased 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 – including in the Ocean State – 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.

Here in Rhode Island, we have seen the forces of censorship at work. Two years ago, a Westerly high school librarian was threatened with a felony obscenity charge for refusing to remove from the school library a book explicitly addressing LGBTQ+ themes. Just a few months ago, in response to a parent's complaint that her elementary school son was allowed to take out a book from the school library that the parent deemed inappropriate, the Glocester school district superintendent issued a directive affecting the rights of all students, ordering the librarians to allow students to take out only "age appropriate" books and to categorize and restrict access to library materials based on this subjective interpretation.

Every day, it seems, modern-day Comstocks are seeking to ban or restrict access to thought-provoking books – and particularly books with racial and LGBTQ+-affirming themes – in school and public libraries. This bill is an important effort to avert that type of censorial mischief.

While we fully respect the rights of parents to have a say in the books that their own elementary school children take out of the school library, they should not be able to dictate what every other student can read. By providing legal protection to libraries and librarians acting in their professional capacity to service students and the public, passage of this bill will send a strong message that Rhode Island remains a haven for intellectual freedom.

The ACLU urges passage of this important legislation.