



Climate Jobs Rhode Island
1540 Pontiac Ave Suite A,
Cranston, RI 02920

April 1, 2025

The Honorable Joseph J. Solomon
House Corporations
Rhode Island State House
Providence, Rhode Island 02903

Re: Support H-5576, Utility Thermal Energy Network and Jobs Act

Dear Chair Solomon and Committee Members,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony. I am submitting these comments on behalf of Climate Jobs Rhode Island and I write in **strong** support of House bill 5576, the Utility Thermal Energy Network and Jobs Act.

Climate Jobs Rhode Island (CJRI) is a coalition of more than thirty (30) labor unions, environmental, and community organizations committed to working together to make Rhode Island a national leader in the development of a resilient 21st century economy through a Just Transition, that centers our frontline communities and frontline workers. Our members range from those who represent the frontline workers who build, repair and maintain Rhode Island's critical infrastructure and energy systems, to community groups like the United Way of RI and Childhood Lead Action Project, to environmental organizations like the Nature Conservancy, and Clean Water Action.

This legislation invests in renewable thermal energy networks, which is clean, efficient, and will significantly reduce emissions without adding stress to our grid. Geothermal energy can provide reliable energy directly from the ground, dramatically reducing pollution compared to traditional fossil fuels.

The implementation of this bill will be overseen and regulated by the Public Utilities Commission (PUC), with Rhode Island Energy responsible for carrying out the projects. The PUC will play a critical role in establishing regulatory frameworks, ensuring cost management, and overseeing compliance with labor standards and just transition provisions. It will set clear guidelines for how utilities construct, operate and maintain thermal energy networks, establishing equitable rules for cost recovery mechanisms to protect consumers from unnecessary expenses. The PUC will also be responsible for ensuring that utilities uphold fair employment practices, prioritizing transitioning existing utility workers into new roles within the thermal energy sector,

and adhere to the labor standards outlined in the legislation. Public engagement and transparency will be central to this process, with the PUC convening stakeholder advisory committees that include community members, technical experts, and impacted groups. These committees will help shape regulations and guide project implementation. Additionally, the PUC will be tasked with providing regular updates on process, costs, and project outcomes through publicly available reports, ensuring that Rhode Islanders are informed and engaged throughout the transition to renewable thermal energy networks.

Rhode Island Energy will be tasked to perform feasibility studies in various parts of the state with a focus on frontline communities and heavy industrial zones that are particularly difficult to decarbonize. Feasibility studies will include assessment of impacts from reduced greenhouse gas emissions and the social cost of carbon, an essential step toward meeting Rhode Island's Act on Climate goals. The utility will shoulder the costs for feasibility studies, reducing the burden on ratepayers. Utilities are directed to leverage maximum federal and state funding and financing opportunities to offset project costs and reduce financial burdens on ratepayers. Pilot projects must explicitly include customer protection plans to ensure transparency and fair allocation of financial responsibility. At least one pilot project must be sited in an environmental justice community.

Critically, this bill protects and supports workers in the legacy fossil fuel industry by ensuring we can apply existing skills in the growing renewable energy sector. It promotes job creation, fair labor practices, project labor agreements, and opens pathways to family-sustaining careers through registered apprenticeship programs. H-5576 invests in a clear path forward for fossil fuel workers, offering job security and new opportunities in the growing green economy. By investing in workforce development and equitable access to clean energy solutions, this bill strengthens both our labor force and our communities.

This legislation also prioritizes frontline and historically burdened communities by emphasizing pilot projects in areas most impacted by economic hardship and industrial pollution. For too long, families in these communities have endured extreme summer heat with inadequate cooling options. As climate change continues to drive hotter and more unpredictable weather patterns, access to reliable and affordable cooling is not a luxury but a necessity. This legislation will provide relief by expanding access to thermal energy networks, offering dependable and cost-effective alternatives to traditional cooling methods, improving the overall quality of life for Rhode Island residents.

Doing these projects at scale ensures cost efficiency and savings while addressing the longstanding disparities in our energy system. By directing benefits to the communities that have borne the brunt of environmental challenges, we can mitigate the cost impacts and reliability issues historically faced by energy-burdened households. This investment is essential for

protecting and expanding good-paying jobs in communities that need them most, fostering economic growth while transitioning to a more resilient and sustainable future.

I urge you to pass H-5576 to advance both economic opportunity and climate action in Rhode Island. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Thank you,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Aislinn Hanley". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending from the end of the name.

Aislinn Hanley

Program Director, Climate Jobs Rhode Island