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The Honorable Christopher O'Brien  
Finance Committee  
State House  
Providence, RI 02903

Dear Representative O'Brien,

I am writing to respectfully urge your support for House Bill 5765, which would allow Rhode Island probation and Parole Officers to be considered for MERS benefits. This recognition is well warranted considering the high stress demands physically and emotionally that we endure while we are tasked with our civil duty in keeping our communities safe, while working to rehabilitating offenders many of whom are severely violent and resist change.

Rhode Island Probation and Parole Officers should absolutely be considered public safety professionals. The majority of our time involves interacting with high-risk populations in the office as well as in the community. Probation and Parole Officers supervise individuals who have been convicted of non-violent crimes as well as heinous crimes. We are tasked with meeting them at their homes and in the office. Oftentimes we are responding unannounced to homes, places of employment or treatment facilities. Volatile situations can occur at any time due to many of our individuals having long histories of violent behavior, substance abuse problems and mental health issues. We work in a high stress environment due to the unpredictability of each individual we meet and are not in a controlled environment.

Probation and Parole Officers are met with the challenge of being calm, with the knowledge that at any moment, the situation can change and become violent. Examples in the office are a probationer overdosing, verbal threats, physically lunging towards a PO, mental health crisis putting a PO at risk as well as others in the area, being spit on and being subject to personal attacks due to their situation. When in the community, we enter high-risk homes and neighborhoods where we encounter volatile situations with mental health crises, substance abuse issues, and threats to our personal safety. Those threats consist of weapons, vicious animals, exposure to drug paraphernalia, individuals under the influence and criminal activities.

Units often have physical contact with Subjects as they perform urine toxicology screens, remote breathalyzers for parolees, putting on GPS monitors and removing them as well as transporting newly released parolees from the ACI. It should be noted the transportation van does not have a cage barrier for protection. We work closely with

police and are often exposed to danger performing 'sweeps' to identify living arrangements or whereabouts of violent offenders.

In addition, the position of a Probation and Parole Officer is both physically and emotionally demanding. We must remain hyper-vigilant and be ready for the 'climate' to change at any time. We continuously deal with family members, support victims and take statements of horrific situations they have been through at the hands of violent offenders as we are handling pre-sentence reports. The demands over time have a cumulative impact and can lead to increased rates of burnout, mental health and/or substance abuse, increased rates of injury and long-term health issues, especially since we are required to work until the age of 67.

House Bill 5765 would recognize the physical and emotional challenges we are faced with day in and day out and align our retirement benefits with other public safety professionals, such as law enforcement and correctional officers, who are rightfully acknowledged for their similar demands of their roles.

I urge you to support House Bill 5765 and advocate for those of us who serve on the front lines of justice and rehabilitation every day.

Sincerely, Deana L Stoloff  
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Rhode Island Department of Corrections