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April 22, 2025

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 not only appropriate but long overdue, considering the nature of our duties and the risks we face daily in the service of public safety.

Rhode Island Probation and Parole Officers hold a unique position in the state. We supervise individuals convicted of crimes to ensure compliance with court-ordered conditions of probation and conditions of parole. We use evidence-based practices to reduce recidivism; however, we also report non-compliance (violations) directly to the courts or Parole Board and make sentencing recommendations, which may result in reincarceration. We conduct background investigations and presentence reports, and this work often brings us into the state's prisons.

We conduct announced and unannounced visits to a defendant's home, place of employment, and in the community. During the execution of our duties, we are exposed to a range of environments, often including high-risk homes and neighborhoods, where we encounter volatile situations, mental health crises, substance abuse issues, and threats to our personal safety (guns, other weapons, uncontrolled animals, drug use, and criminal activities). We work with local, state, and federal law enforcement agents to not only conduct home visits but 4th amendment waiver compliance checks to monitor compliance with conditions as set forth by the court.

In Parole, our officers can administer urine toxicology screens, are on-call, monitor GPS and SCRAM remote breathalyzers for parolees and respond immediately to parole violations, and obtain revocation warrants when necessary. We transport newly released parolees from the ACI to our office in a van that does not have a cage barrier for our protection.

Beyond the inherent dangers, the profession is both physically and emotionally demanding. We are required to remain hyper-vigilant, adaptable, and responsive under pressure, all while maintaining composure and professionalism in unpredictable and often high-stress environments. These demands take a toll over time, and as officers age, the cumulative impact can lead to **increased rates of injury, burnout, mental health or substance issues, long-term health issues**, particularly when required to work until the current retirement age of 67.

House Bill 5765 would provide long-needed recognition of these challenges and align our retirement benefits with other public safety professionals, such as law enforcement and correctional officers, who are rightfully acknowledged for the 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,

Fernando Comas
Probation and Parole Officer
Department of Corrections