



April 28, 2025

The Honorable Marvin L. Abney, Chair
House Finance Committee on
Rhode Island Statehouse
Providence, 02903

RE: Testimony In Support of House Bill 5280 – Relating to Education – Higher Education
Opportunities for Students With Disabilities Act

On behalf of United Way of Rhode Island, we are writing to express our strong support for House Bill 5280, recognizing that expanding access to higher education opportunities for students with disabilities is essential to workforce development, economic mobility, and long-term financial stability. A core priority of our Achieve United initiative is ensuring that all Rhode Islanders, regardless of background or ability, have equitable access to the education, training, and career pathways necessary to secure meaningful employment and family-sustaining wages. By investing in inclusive education programs, we create the conditions necessary for every student to reach their fullest potential and contribute to a more resilient Rhode Island economy.

House Bill 5280 is critical to strengthening Rhode Island's workforce by expanding opportunities for students with disabilities to audit courses and attend public colleges and universities using their foundation education aid. This investment would support students' skill development, enhance postsecondary success, and align Rhode Island's higher education system with best practices for inclusion and workforce readiness.

Expanding higher education access for students with disabilities is not just an equity imperative—it is an economic one. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2023), only 37% of young adults with disabilities nationally are employed compared to 79% of those without disabilities (NCES, 2023). Increasing educational opportunities directly correlates with improved employment outcomes, higher wages, and reduced reliance on public assistance.

By creating a pathway for students with disabilities to engage in postsecondary education, House Bill 5280 helps Rhode Island tap into a talented, motivated segment of the workforce that is often

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

overlooked. Ensuring that students with disabilities can access higher education opportunities not only strengthens individual economic mobility but also addresses broader workforce shortages across industries. This bill builds a foundation for inclusive growth and ensures Rhode Island's economy benefits from the contributions of every resident.

Strengthening Rhode Island's workforce through House Bill 5280 aligns with our commitment to economic mobility, fairness, and long-term prosperity. By expanding access to higher education for students with disabilities, we can create a skilled, inclusive workforce that meets employer needs while ensuring economic opportunity for all Rhode Islanders.

We respectfully urge your support for House Bill 5280 to invest in workforce readiness, strengthen career pathways, and provide access to training and education that serves each person to thrive to their fullest potential. United Way of Rhode Island remains committed to working alongside policymakers, educators, businesses, and community organizations to ensure every individual has the tools and opportunities needed to succeed.

Sincerely,

Ellijah McLean
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