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March 19, 2026

Representative Teresa Tanzi, Chair
House Finance Subcommittee on Human Services
Rhode Island House of Representatives

RE: H7127 – Office of the Mental Health Advocate

Dear Chair Tanzi and Members of the Subcommittee,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in strong support of the Office of the Mental Health Advocate.

This Office plays a critical constitutional and statutory role in protecting the civil rights and liberty interests of individuals living with mental illness—particularly those subject to involuntary commitment, involuntary medication, and involvement in the criminal legal system due to lack of appropriate community-based care.

Despite this responsibility, the Office operates with only **6.0 full-time staff**, including four attorneys. These individuals manage a high volume of complex cases annually while also providing broader advocacy, consultation, and system oversight.

When compared to a similarly situated agency, a clear disparity emerges. The Office of the Child Advocate employs 13 full-time staff, more than double the staffing capacity, enabling a multidisciplinary approach to oversight and advocacy. The Office of the Mental Health Advocate does not have comparable capacity, limiting its ability to meet growing demand.

In addition, the Director of the Office of the Mental Health Advocate is compensated at a lower level than the Child Advocate, despite overseeing a similarly complex and constitutionally grounded legal function. This disparity in both staffing and leadership compensation should be addressed to ensure equity and alignment with the scope of responsibility.

Without increased staffing and appropriate leadership compensation, the Office's ability to provide timely representation and effective system oversight is

constrained, and the State risks falling short of its constitutional obligations.

I respectfully urge the Committee to support increased staffing and appropriate compensation adjustments for the Office of the Mental Health Advocate to ensure it can fulfill its mandate.

Thank you for your consideration

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Susan C. Jacobsen". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "S" and a long, sweeping underline.

Susan Jacobsen, LMHC
Chief Executive Officer
Child & Family Rhode Island