

Dear Chair Abney Honorable Committee Members,

I am writing to express strong support for H7059, which provides an appropriation of \$100,000 to the Rhode Island Office of Healthy Aging for the Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program.

At a time when complaints to the Ombudsman Program have more than tripled—from 597 in 2023 to over 1,700 in 2025—this investment is both timely and necessary. The increase reflects rising resident acuity, greater complexity of care needs, and growing demand for independent advocacy within long-term care settings.

The Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program, established under the federal Older Americans Act, serves as an **independent advocate for residents of nursing homes, assisted living, and other long-term care settings**. Ombudsmen work directly with residents and families to identify, investigate, and resolve concerns through mediation, education, and systems advocacy. Their work is resident-directed, confidential, and grounded in promoting dignity, autonomy, and quality of life.

It is important to distinguish the Ombudsman's role within the broader system:

- The Ombudsman **does not regulate or enforce compliance**—that responsibility belongs to the RI Department of Health.
- The Ombudsman **does not conduct protective investigations**—that role belongs to Adult Protective Services and police.
- The Ombudsman **does not make decisions for residents**, but instead advocates based on the resident's wishes.

This unique role allows Ombudsmen to identify concerns early, de-escalate issues, and resolve problems before they result in harm or require regulatory or clinical intervention.

Recent Rhode Island Ombudsman data further illustrates the scope and seriousness of concerns being addressed. In FFY 2025, the program responded to **over 2,000 concerns statewide**, including:

- **460 complaints related to care quality**, including issues such as response to assistance, care planning, medications, and personal hygiene
- **285 complaints involving abuse, neglect, or exploitation**
- **174 complaints related to admission, transfer, discharge, or eviction**, including to homelessness

Many complaints involve issues such as delayed assistance, medication concerns, inadequate hygiene, and staffing shortages—problems that can quickly lead to avoidable hospitalizations, regulatory deficiencies, and serious harm to residents if not addressed.

Peer-reviewed research shows that increased funding for Long-Term Care Ombudsman Programs is associated with improved nursing home resident care. For Rhode Island, this investment offers a meaningful return by resolving concerns earlier, strengthening care coordination, reducing preventable harm, and avoiding higher-cost Medicaid and Medicare utilization.

A 2024 Medicaid rate analysis for nursing facilities and hospice estimates SFY 2025 expenditures between approximately **\$505 million and \$579 million**, depending on the rate scenario. Against this level of spending, the \$100,000 appropriation in H7059 is a modest, targeted investment in resident advocacy, early problem resolution, and improved care quality.

While Rhode Island does not publish a single aggregate cost of adverse events, national data demonstrate the financial impact. Potentially preventable hospitalizations average roughly **\$10,000 to \$15,000 per event**. Preventing just **7 to 10 hospitalizations** would offset the full appropriation.

H7059 represents a thoughtful and strategic investment—one that supports resident rights, improves care, and promotes more efficient use of public resources.

Thank you for your consideration and for your continued commitment to Rhode Island's older adults and individuals with disabilities.

Sincerely,

Deb Burton, MS (she/her)

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Gerontologist, Executive Director, RI Elder Info

Host Friday Friends Podcast

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Deb Burton is Founder and Executive Director of the nonprofit RI Elder Info. RI Elder Info (rielderinfo.com) maintains comprehensive multilingual information on Federal, State and Local resources for Seniors, Caregivers and Professionals. RI Elder Info 's mission is to

empower people throughout the aging journey by providing easy one-stop access to comprehensive information and resources.

Following the organizations core belief that Information is power and no one should struggle to live a healthy, safe, dignified and happy life from a lack of it, Deb hosts RI Elder Info's variety of educational livestream programming such as the weekly "Friday Friends" podcast, "Voting Rights in Long Term Care", "How to Secure Your Credit Report in the Wake of a Data Breach!", the monthly "Community Collaborations for Older Adults" professional networking group as well as coordinates multiple community-based resource events for Seniors, Caregivers and Veterans.

Deb holds a Master's of Science in Gerontology in the Management of Aging Services from University of Massachusetts-Boston, is a member of the Gerontological Society of America and has been inducted into Sigma Phi Omega (SPO), the International Academic Honor and Professional Society in Gerontology.

She is a member of both Congressman Magaziner and Congressman Amo's "Senior Advisory Committee" as well as Governor McKee's "Advisory Commission On Aging". Deb is a former member of Congressman Langevin's (retired) "Senior Advisory Committee". Deb is a member of the RI Coalition for Elder Justice (RICEJ) Guardianship Reform subcommittee, RI Elder Mental Health and Addiction Coalition (RIEMHAC) and former member of the RI Minority Elder Task Force (RIMETF).

In addition, Deb regularly participates as a member of the public in the Lieutenant Governor's Long Term Care Coordinating Council (LTCCC), was on the Housing Access and Affordability subcommittee, the LGBT Elders subcommittee and the LTCCC Behavioral Health work group. is also a participant in the Rhode Island Elder Mental Health and Addiction Coalition (RIEMHAC).