



May 5, 2026

House Committee on Finance
Rhode Island State House
housefinance@rilegislature.gov

Re: Testimony SUPPORTING HR 7059, appropriating \$100,000 to the Rhode Island Office Of Healthy Aging for the RI Long-Term Care Ombudsman program

Dear Chair Abney and Honorable Committee Members,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony in strong support of HR 7059

ABC-RI engages in systemic and legislative advocacy for the rights and interests of residents in long-term care facilities in RI. As the director of ABC-RI, I am also a certified volunteer ombudsman, and I regularly witness the profound impact of the dedicated direct advocacy in which ombudsmen engage on behalf of residents and those receiving licensed care at home.

My husband was mistreated in an assisted living dementia care facility. The support we received from the Ombudsman Program inspired me to volunteer with the program. As a volunteer, I witnessed ombudsmen's passion and dedication, the challenges they helped residents and care partners overcome, and the real improvements they brought about in quality of life and quality of care. That experience inspired me to found ABC-RI.

Long term care ombudsmen are the only individuals whose exclusive mission is to represent the rights and interests of residents in long term care. **More than 70% of long-stay nursing home residents have some degree of cognitive or communication impairment**, and roughly half are moderately to severely impaired, meaning they cannot reliably communicate their own needs, recognize when their rights are being violated, or navigate a complaint process (Thomas et al., 2017, cited in *Research on Aging*, 2024).

And for many, no one else is advocating for them either. According to the National Center for Health Statistics, **approximately 60% of nursing home residents receive no regular visitors**. More than half have no close relatives, and 46% have no living children (NCHS, cited in *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, 2010). When a resident can't advocate for themselves and has no family showing up to ask questions, the Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program is the only independent eyes and ears in that facility. Adequately funding the LTCOP is the last line of defense for some of the most vulnerable people in our state.

Ombudsmen routinely help residents with challenges ranging from physical, verbal, or mental abuse, poor quality of care, and lack of respect and privacy, to problems with food and meals, billing and personal-funds disputes, and lost belongings. Many of these never rise to the level of a formal RIDOH

survey deficiency, but they are precisely the conditions that determine whether a resident lives with dignity or in distress. The ombudsman is often the only outside party a resident will tell, because the ombudsman is always on the resident's side, and unless you give them permission to share your concerns, whatever you say remains confidential.

Rhode Island must fully support this crucial program, more important than ever as our population ages and requires more long-term care, and as more of our locally owned facilities are taken over by private equity firms and out-of-state investor groups. HR 7059 is a very modest appropriation to support the rights and well-being of some of our most vulnerable Rhode Islanders.

Thank you for all of your work on behalf of all Rhode Islanders.

Sincerely,
Kathleen Gerard,
ABC-RI

The RI State Long Term Ombudsman Program addressed more than 2000 concerns from residents and families in 2025 alone.

