



UNIVERSITY OF RHODE ISLAND PROFESSIONAL STAFF ASSOCIATION (URIPSA)
90 Lower College Road, 300 Roosevelt Hall, Kingston, RI 02881
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###OFFICIAL ELECTRONIC TESTIMONY###

TO: The Honorable Chair and Members of the Finance Committee
FROM: John Rooney, President, URI Professional Staff Association (URI-PSA/NEARI/NEA)
CC: URI Professional Staff Association Membership; NEARI Offices
DATE: March 28, 2026
RE: SUPPORT for HB 7055 / SB 2501 – Restoring the Right to Negotiate Longevity Payments

Chairperson and Members of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. My name is John Rooney. I am a proud double alumnus of the University of Rhode Island, a 15-year employee, and currently serve as the Assistant Director of Transfer Student Success. I am here today in my capacity as President of the URI Professional Staff Association (URI-PSA), **representing our 430 active, dues-paying professional staff members**—the people who keep the state's flagship university running every day.

I strongly urge your support for HB7055 and SB2501 because these bills restore a fundamentally practical right: the right of labor and management to negotiate longevity payments in collective bargaining agreements, beginning July 1, 2026.

And the most powerful part of today's testimony is this: we do not have to rely on hypotheticals. We can prove the inequity and the retention risk using our exact workforce data at URI. (Please reference the attached Data Appendix for a complete breakdown of the following figures.

1) The 2011 Freeze Created a Permanent Two-Tier Workforce

In 2011, Rhode Island law froze longevity. That legal design created two distinct classes of employees—those with accrued longevity locked in, and those who could never earn it. Here is the exact breakdown of our 430 active union members today:

- **281 members (65.3% of our union)** have a Base Entry Date on or after July 1, 2011. These 281 professionals have never had access to longevity, and under the current framework, they never will.
- **149 members (34.7%)** were in state service before July 1, 2011. Of those, **only 60 members** had actually reached the minimum longevity threshold (10+ years of service) by the time of the freeze.

This means longevity was frozen for a protected group of just 60 people, while nearly two-thirds of today's active union workforce was permanently excluded solely on the basis of an arbitrary hire date.

2) The "Talent Cliff": Our Data Proves They Leave at Their Prime

If you want to know if the 2011 freeze damaged our retention, you simply have to look at the current distribution of our membership's years of service. A drastic "Talent Cliff" has emerged right at the decade mark.

- **0–5 Years in Service:** 130 members (*A healthy recruitment pipeline*)
- **5–10 Years in Service:** 91 members
- **10–15 Years in Service:** 68 members (The Talent Cliff)
- **15–20 Years in Service:** 44 members

As our post-2011 hires approach the 10-to-15 year mark—the exact moment an employee masters their complex job—they hit a financial dead end. Because they have no longevity incentive to stay, we see a massive exodus of our mid-career talent.

But ironically, when you look at our most senior staff, the number spikes drastically: we currently have **97 members with 20+ years of service**. Why? Because that senior group consists of the pre-2011 employees who were grandfathered in and kept their longevity pay. The data is indisputable: when the state offers longevity pay, our talent stays for their entire careers. When you take it away, they leave right at their prime.

3) The Promotion Myth: Time in Service Is Long, Pay Changes Are Rare

It is often argued that employees do not need longevity pay because they receive structural pay changes or promotions over time. Our payroll data definitively disproves that. For our 430 dues-paying members, the average time since their Base Entry Date is **12.6 years**. Yet, structural pay progression is severely stagnant:

- **141 members (32.8% of our union)** have received no structural pay or class changes since the day they entered the state system.
- **82 members (19.1%)** have gone 10 or more years since their last structural change.



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Furthermore, we examined our core professional pay grades and found massive internal salary spreads without the longevity mechanisms needed to bridge them predictably. For example, in **Pay Grade 12 (94 members)**, there is a **\$40,863 spread** between the minimum and maximum salaries, **yet over 22% of members in this grade have never had a structural class change**. Longevity is the missing, historic mechanism that acknowledged accumulating service while staff sat in these grades for a decade.

4) The Direct Impact on Student Achievement and Strategic Alignment

When we talk about retaining professional staff, we are fundamentally talking about protecting the Rhode Island student experience. Looking at our exact membership data, nearly **40% of our active union (162 members) serve in direct, student-facing, and student-success roles**. When an experienced Academic Advisor leaves URI after 8 years because they have no longevity incentive to stay, the university loses more than an employee. We lose the institutional relationships that keep our students enrolled.

Furthermore, the failure to retain these professionals directly contradicts the University's *Focus URI 2023–2033 Strategic Plan*.

- **Strategic Priority 2 (Enhance Student Achievement):** The plan explicitly calls for an environment where students are "empowered to lead their own academic journey with access to resources and support that places value on inclusion, well-being, and holistic development". It mandates that URI "develop strategies and programs that cultivate a sense of belonging and ensure student success, retention, and timely degree completion". We cannot ensure timely degree completion or holistic support if the professionals providing these services are operating a revolving door.
- **Strategic Priority 3 (Foster an Inclusive Culture):** The plan envisions a "vibrant, integrated university that celebrates the uniqueness of its members and fosters a culture of valuing people, excellence, and giving back". It requires the University to "attract, recognize, and retain outstanding faculty and staff" and to "institute streamlined, contemporary, and equitable talent acquisition and retention processes and practices, including a competitive and equitable salary structure".

Currently, our data proves we are failing this mandate. We do not have an equitable salary structure or a people-centered culture when 65.3% of our workforce is permanently locked out of longevity pay.

Closing

Chairperson and Members of the Committee, **I want to be clear about what this legislation represents. We are not demanding immediate action today, nor are we asking this committee for an unfunded mandate. We are simply asking for the tools to properly bargain with the University.** HB7055 and SB2501 restore the legal authority for labor and management to sit at the table and solve this retention crisis responsibly. If the University of Rhode Island is to successfully power the "University of the Future", we must be able to negotiate compensation that stops the bleeding of our mid-career talent.

I respectfully ask for a favorable recommendation on HB7055 and SB2501.

Thank you.

John Rooney
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Assistant Director, Transfer Student Success
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DATA APPENDIX: URI-PSA Membership & Longevity Impact

Submitted by: John Rooney, President, URI-PSA **Dataset:** URI-PSA Dues-Paying Members Only (N=430 active members analyzed out of 688 total PSA-eligible positions) | **Data Date:** March 3, 2026

- 1. The "Two-Tier" Workforce Reality** The 2011 longevity freeze created a permanent structural divide within the union based strictly on an employee's hire date.
 - **Total Active Members Analyzed:** 430
 - **Locked Out of Longevity (Tier 2):** 281 members (**65.3%**). These members entered state service on or after July 1, 2011, and have zero path to longevity pay.
 - **Pre-2011 Hires (Tier 1):** 149 members (34.7%). Of these, only **60 members** had reached the 10-year longevity threshold prior to the freeze.
 - **The Flight Risk:** Of the 281 members legally locked out of longevity, **60 members** have now crossed 10 years of state service with zero longevity recognition.
- 2. The Talent Cliff (Attrition by Years of Service)** Without longevity pay, post-2011 hires leave exactly when they reach their mid-career prime. Pre-2011 hires (who retained longevity) stay.
 - **0-5 Years:** 130 Members (*Healthy recruitment pipeline*)
 - **5-10 Years:** 91 Members
 - **10-15 Years (The Cliff):** 68 Members (*Mass exodus without longevity incentives*)
 - **15-20 Years:** 44 Members
 - **20+ Years (Tier 1 Rebound):** 97 Members (*Proof that grandfathered longevity retains talent*)
- 3. The Retirement Wave & The Coming "Knowledge Vacuum"** URI is facing an imminent threat to its institutional memory.
 - **59 active members** have 25+ years of service and are rapidly approaching retirement. When these Tier 1 veterans retire, the university must rely on mid-career (Tier 2) staff to lead.
 - If the state does not restore the longevity pay negotiation tool to retain employees currently on the "Talent Cliff," URI will face a devastating knowledge vacuum.
- 4. The Promotion Myth: Service Accumulates, Pay Stagnates.** The data disproves the claim that longevity pay is unnecessary due to routine promotions.
 - **Average Time in State Service:** 12.6 Years
 - **Zero Structural Movement:** 141 members (**32.8%**) have experienced *no structural pay or class changes* since entering state service.
 - **A Decade of Stagnation:** 82 members (**19.1%**) have gone 10 or more years since their last structural class change. This stagnation is heavily concentrated in critical student hubs, including the *University College for Academic Success, CELS, and the Child Development Centers.*
- 5. Internal Pay Grade Disparities & Income Hardship** Without longevity pay, core professional pay grades contain massive salary spreads that fail to predictably reward service, disproportionately hurting moderate-income earners.
 - **Income Hardship:** 114 active members (**26.5%** of the union) make a base salary of less than \$70,000, making them highly vulnerable to inflation and wage stagnation.
 - **Pay Grade 12 (94 Members):** Salary Spread = **\$40,863** (Min: \$68,124 | Max: \$108,987). 22% of members in this grade have no structural change.
 - **Pay Grade 13 (42 Members):** Salary Spread = **\$38,189**. Average time since last class change is 10.9 years.
- 6. The Operational Footprint: A University-Wide Impact** The PSA is not a back-office bureaucracy; it represents the operational frontline of the University of Rhode Island. A functional breakdown of our 430 active members proves that the retention crisis threatens every facet of the student experience and R1 research operations:
 - **Research, Grants & Innovation (R1 Operations): 138 Members (32.1%)**
 - *Impact:* Managing federal compliance and executing multi-million dollar grants.
 - *Roles:* Marine Research Associates, Post-Award Grant Specialists, State Crime Lab Scientists.
 - **University Administration & Communications: 114 Members (26.5%)**
 - *Impact:* Executing complex institutional programming and outreach.
 - *Roles:* Project Managers, Child Development Center Teachers, Medical Intervention Coordinators.



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- **IT & Digital Infrastructure: 58 Members (13.5%)**
 - *Impact:* Securing network systems and ensuring digital accessibility.
 - *Roles:* Digital Content Strategists, IT Services Specialists, Web Accessibility Coordinators.
- **Academic Advising & Student Success: 47 Members (10.9%)**
 - *Impact:* Guiding students to timely degree completion and maintaining retention rates.
 - *Roles:* Academic Advisors, Learning Specialists, Talent Development Advisors.
- **Health, Safety & Student Well-Being: 37 Members (8.6%)**
 - *Impact:* Protecting the physical and mental health of the student body and student-athletes.
 - *Roles:* Athletic Trainers, Counseling Center Specialists, Public Safety Operations.
- **Enrollment, Admissions & Career Planning: 30 Members (7.0%)**
 - *Impact:* Recruiting new students, managing financial aid, and launching graduates into the workforce.
 - *Roles:* Enrollment Services Officers, Admission Advisors, Career Education Specialists.
- **Campus Operations & Facilities: 6 Members (1.4%)**
 - *Impact:* Managing the physical infrastructure of a residential campus.
 - *Roles:* Energy Management Systems Managers, Dining Operations Managers.