

House Finance Committee

Room 35

Rhode Island State House

Providence, RI 02903

RE: Support for House Bill 7055 – Longevity Payments

Chairman Abney and Members of the House Finance Committee:

My name is Heather Croteau, and I serve as COPE Secretary for SEIU Local 580. I am submitting written testimony in support of House Bill 7055, which would restore the ability of state employees and the State of Rhode Island to negotiate longevity payments through the collective bargaining process.

In 2011, as part of broader pension and budget reforms, Rhode Island eliminated future longevity increases for most state employees and removed longevity as a subject of collective bargaining. Employees who had already accrued longevity retained those benefits, but an entire generation of state workers has since entered public service without access to a benefit that historically rewarded long-term commitment and experience.

House Bill 7055 does not create an automatic entitlement, mandate a benefit, or impose an immediate fiscal obligation on the State. It does not provide retroactive payments. It simply restores the ability of labor and management to negotiate longevity in future collective bargaining agreements, returning the decision to where it belongs: at the bargaining table.

This matters because state government today faces serious recruitment and retention challenges. Across agencies, experienced employees are retiring or leaving for opportunities offering greater compensation and flexibility. Nowhere is this more consequential than in human services and child welfare, where the loss of seasoned staff directly affects the quality and continuity of services provided to Rhode Island's most vulnerable residents.

For many years, employees entered state service expecting to build a career. Longevity pay recognized that commitment and rewarded employees who stayed, developed expertise, and dedicated years of service to the people of Rhode Island. Since the elimination of future longevity increases in 2011, many employees have entered public service without access to a benefit that prior generations of workers relied upon as part of a long-term career path.

Longevity pay was designed to recognize institutional knowledge, reward dedication, and encourage employees to remain in public service. Those goals are no less important today. As workers increasingly move between employers in search of better pay and benefits, the tools available to attract and retain experienced public servants matter more than ever.

House Bill 7055 offers a reasonable and balanced path forward. It does not mandate longevity payments or create an automatic benefit. It simply restores the ability of labor and management to negotiate this issue through the collective bargaining process. Returning longevity to the bargaining table gives both parties the flexibility to determine whether it is an appropriate workforce retention tool for the future.

I urge the Committee to support House Bill 7055 and to invest in a workforce that continues to serve the people of Rhode Island every day.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Heather Croteau

COPE Secretary, SEIU Local 580