



March 2, 2025

The Honorable Robert Craven, Chair  
House Judiciary Committee  
Rhode Island State House  
82 Smith Street  
Providence, Rhode Island 02903

Re: H5672 Adoption of Children

Dear Chairman Craven and members of the Judiciary Committee:

I am writing to express my full support for House bill 5672. This bill will provide children the ability to continue their sibling relationships throughout their childhood, even when they are separated by foster care, adoption, or guardianship. Sibling relationships can be the most lasting and critical relationships in many families. This bill will provide children in foster care an opportunity to continue their sibling relationships post -child welfare involvement when they have been placed with different families for the purpose of adoption or guardianship.

Adoption Rhode Island is a private non-profit organization with a mission to provide safety, permanency, and a sense of belonging in foster and adopted children, vulnerable youth, and families through compassionate services, education, and advocacy. In our 40 plus -year history, we have worked with and advocated for many thousands of Rhode Island foster and adopted children, youth, and families. Over the years we have supported countless pieces of legislation and public policy that seeks to advance practice in child and family services. As we learn more about best practices, we must ensure that our child welfare policies in Rhode Island are aligned with best practice in the field. For many years, the concepts of open adoption or adoptee access to birth records were not understood and not supported. Eventually policy makers began to hear from constituents how critical it is for children and adults to be able to maintain birth family connections and/or re-connect with birth family following a closed adoption to a person's sense of belonging and their identity formation. Story after story about why secrecy and disconnection in family life can be harmful and how truth and relationship- building in adoption and permanency lead to better lifelong outcomes were heard in Rhode Island legislative hearings. This year, we support adding important additional language to our Rhode Island statute that will contribute to closing a gap in our law. We would like to be sure that siblings in foster care can remain connected post permanency. We are listening to former foster

youth and adult adoptees about the importance of lifelong sibling connections. We value their perspectives.

At any given time, there are approximately 400,000 children in the foster care system in the United States. Approximately two-thirds of children in foster care in the United States have a sibling in care. Many of these children are separated from their siblings. A common reason given for these separations is that case workers could not find temporary or permanent placements for all the children. Most of these children have experienced multiple losses, adversity, and trauma related to the reasons that brought them into the child welfare system. Separation from siblings can further exacerbate the trauma experienced by children in foster care.

Sibling relationships are among the most influential relationships of one's life. For youth in foster care, sibling relationships may be particularly important. According to the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being (NSCAW) higher sibling relationship quality was associated with lower depressive symptoms among youth in foster care. Siblings can offer each other comfort, understanding, and a sense of shared history, which can be especially important when dealing with the stress of being removed from their birth parents. Maintaining sibling relationships helps children maintain a sense of identity and family connection.

At Adoption Rhode Island, we have focused on the importance of sibling relationships for decades. We have heard from many children over the years how they miss their siblings, worry about siblings, and long for their connections to brothers and sisters who no longer live in the same home as them. We work closely with prospective adoptive families to help them provide permanency for sibling groups together, offer clinical sibling assessments to family court in cases where placement decisions regarding a child's best interest is questioned, and offer a program called *Forever Siblings* that provides fun camp experiences for foster children who are separated in care. We also provide family search and engagement services that supports efforts by DCYF to help move children who are stuck in our foster care system find lost relatives. With the help of a private investigator and social worker, we often find relatives, including older siblings that were disconnected from the child in foster care at an early age. We work to reconnect them. Even with this advocacy, support, and special programming, we know that some adoptive and guardianship families are not able to provide permanent family homes for all members of a sibling group. The reasons can include large sibling group size, differences in the needs of siblings, entering foster care at different times, and a shortage of foster and adoptive families. And some children separated in foster care will remain separated in adoption or guardianship. These children deserve the opportunity to remain in relationship with one and other through a formal contact agreement. Relying on each parent to understand and agree to preserve this relationship does not work for some children. By including this important relationship in post-permanency agreements, this will increase the importance of maintaining this lifelong bond and ensuring the voices of children are heard in and by our system. By listening to the voices of young adults who have been

separated in care who often tell us about the impact of trauma they experienced from being separated, we can prevent this trauma for children currently in care preparing for permanency.

In 2008, the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act was passed. This law required states to put policies in place that addressed the importance of sibling placement and connection for children entering the foster care system. This required states to make reasonable efforts to place children together whenever possible and provide for frequent visitation when they are not placed in the same home. In addition to the Fostering Connections Act, other federal legislation has included provisions recognizing the importance of sibling connections. The Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act of 2014 and the Families First Prevention Services Act of 2018 both include provisions that recognize the growing understanding of how important sibling connections are to a child's well-being.

In 2012, the New England Association of Child Welfare Commissioners came together to recognize the importance of sibling relationships and develop language that each state could commit to creating a sibling bill of rights. Rhode Island signed its own Sibling Bill of Rights for children while they are in foster care that year.

In 2018, Rhode Island settled a class action lawsuit filed by Children's Rights that addressed many deficiencies in our child placement system. The settlement agreement included 20 indicators designed to ensure children in out of home placement due to abuse and neglect receive the highest possible level of care. This included the need to improve sibling placements of children while in the care and custody of DCYF. By 2022, DCYF made improvements to their practices and were able to demonstrate improved outcomes in this area and were released from the terms of the agreement in relation to deficient sibling placements. In 2022, RI General Law 40-11-12.2 was passed. This law, while not specific to siblings, required DCYF to make, reasonable efforts to prevent or eliminate the need for removing the child from the child's home. When not possible, efforts shall include placement of the child with a blood relative or other family member if such placement is in the best interests of the child. The term 'relative' includes stepparent; grandparent; great-grandparent; a parent's or grandparent's sibling; and the child's sibling, stepsibling, half-sibling, or first cousin. This law recognizes the importance of birth family connections for children in need of state child welfare services. All these federal and state laws and policies recognize the importance of promoting family relationships to improve lifelong child well-being outcomes.

**While all these laws and policies have significantly shifted practice to value and prioritize birth family connections while children remain in foster care, there remains a need to advance best practice beyond the time children are in foster care to include post permanency through adoption and guardianship.** By codifying the sibling language through H5672 in our Rhode Island General laws, we will be strengthening our ability to ensure that children who need foster care for the purposes of child protection are not permanently separated and lose this critical and important lifelong relationship. This bill will help ensure that children's relationships are preserved. While most state statutes across the country permit post

adoption contact or communication for birth parents, some states also allow other birth relatives to be included in the agreements including grandparents, aunts, uncles, and siblings. According to the Child Welfare information Gateway, approximately 13 states, including California, Connecticut, and New York, post adoption contact agreements can include sibling visitation.

In summary, I support House bill 5672. I believe this bill will provide an important legal protection for children in foster care when they exit to permanency. The only suggestion, I would make is the inclusion of court determination of "significant emotional attachment." Because separation in foster care can negatively impact that attachment, I don't want that proposed determination to be a legal barrier for any siblings. I recommend that significant emotional attachment language requirement be stricken from the legislation. I believe the determination of "best interest" along with the other court findings will be sufficient. Let's make 2025 the year we further support foster children's sibling rights in Rhode Island.

Please do not hesitate to contact me with questions. I can be reached at [dallen@adoptionri.org](mailto:dallen@adoptionri.org) or 401-524-3456. Thank you very much for your consideration of this legislation.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Darlene Allen". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Darlene" being more prominent than the last name "Allen".

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