

# OFFICE OF THE PUBLIC DEFENDER

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February 4, 2026

## TESTIMONY OF THE OFFICE OF THE PUBLIC DEFENDER REGARDING:

House Bill No. 7282

### **ENTITLED, AN ACT RELATING CRIMINAL PROCEDURE—STATE CRIME LABORATORY COMMISSION**

Chairwoman Hagan McEntee and Members of the House Judiciary Committee:

The Office of the Public Defender strongly supports House Bill 7282, which would diversify the membership of the Rhode Island State Crime Laboratory Commission (“the Commission”) by increasing its membership to nine members, three of whom would have a background in criminal defense. This bill is an important step towards increasing the transparency, accountability, and public trust in the State Crime Lab’s work.

It is no secret that the State Crime Lab has faced significant challenges in the past few years. In August of 2024, the State Crime Lab suspended some of its firearm-related analyses after discrepancies were found in lab results from a 2021 murder case. Last April, the State Crime Lab Director Dennis Hilliard requested a review of the lab by the ASNI National Accreditation Board, two years ahead of when the review would have been required.<sup>1</sup>

Since the last time this issue was before this committee, the review revealed that the lab did not conform with 15 of the 172 professional standards (8.7%).<sup>2</sup> While the State Crime Lab has worked to come back into compliance, the past few years have demonstrated why diverse representation on the Commission is needed.

The current makeup of the Commission is decidedly non-diverse; it is composed of members of law enforcement, representatives from the Attorney General’s office, and two members of the public appointed by the governor. Notably absent is any representative of the

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Reynolds, *Rhode Island state crime lab faces full accreditation review amid forensic errors*, THE PROVIDENCE JOURNAL, 14 March 2025, available at <https://www.providencejournal.com/story/news/crime/2025/03/14/fallout-of-forensic-errors-ri-crime-lab-faces-accreditation-review/80283290007/?gnt-cfr=1&gca-cat=p&gca-uir=true&gca-epi=z112707p000555c000555v112707d--60--60--&gca-ft=170&gca-ds=sophi> (last accessed February 4, 2026).

<sup>2</sup> Mark Reynolds, *Assessors find ‘nonconformities’ with national standards at RI Crime Lab*, THE PROVIDENCE JOURNAL, 23 May 2025, available at <https://www.providencejournal.com/story/news/crime/2025/05/23/ri-crime-lab-found-out-of-conformation-with-some-national-standards/83803497007/> (last accessed February 4, 2026).

Administration	Appeals	Felony Division	Misdemeanor/PAC	Licht VOP Unit	Family Court	Investigations
222-1511	222-1510	222-1540	222-1520	222-1312	222-1530	222-3492

criminal defense community. This, as Mr. Hilliard noted in a 2025 Commission meeting, is contrary to the recommendations from a panel convened at the 2024 Conference of the National Association of Forensic Science Boards (“NAFSB”), which discussed the importance of including defense lawyers in forensic science oversight boards like the Commission. The NAFSB recommendation is echoed in a 2022 Report for the National Institute of Justice’s Forensic Technology Center of Excellence, which states that “[s]tate forensic science commissions and oversight boards provide a forum for robust discussions between forensic science stakeholders to improve communication and coordination.”<sup>3</sup> The term “forensic science stakeholders” unquestionably includes representatives from the criminal defense community.

Accordingly, the current makeup of the Commission goes against the field’s best practice recommendations; however, HB 7282 would go a long way towards correcting this imbalance. The inclusion of defense attorneys in the Commission would significantly strengthen the lab’s ability to provide accurate, reliable, and impartial forensic analyses—and prevent the State Crime Lab’s recent issues from recurring in the future. After all, such inaccuracies can lead to truly tragic consequences, such as crime victims being deprived of justice and the innocent suffering wrongful convictions.

If passed, HB7282 would enhance the transparency of the State Crime Lab’s operations and ensure that all parties—prosecution, defense, and the public—have an equal opportunity to oversee and scrutinize the lab’s practices, which will, in turn, ensure that the forensics evidence used in the criminal justice system is reliable and trustworthy. Accordingly, the Office of the Public Defender urges this Committee to support HB7282.

Sincerely,



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Legislative Liaison

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<sup>3</sup> Ropero-Miller, J.D. and Jones, N., *Forensic Science State Commissions and Oversight Bodies—a 2022 Update*, Research Triangle Prak, NC: RTI International, p. 11 (2022).