

Memo To: House Committee on Judiciary
From: Kelly Nevins, CEO, Women's Fund of Rhode Island
Date: February 11, 2026
Regards: Support of Bill H7488

Women's Fund of Rhode Island (WFRI) respectfully submits written testimony in support of **House Bill 7488**, specifically the provisions that remove the intent requirement from the statutory definition of **neglect** in healthcare facilities and in statutes governing the care of older adults.

This bill is an important step toward advancing **health equity and disability justice** in Rhode Island. WFRI's mission is grounded in advancing systems that ensure women, and the families and communities who rely on them, can live with dignity, safety, and access to care. That mission necessarily includes older adults and people with disabilities who are disproportionately affected by gaps in accountability within healthcare and long-term care systems.

Under current Rhode Island law, neglect of elderly persons and healthcare facility residents must be shown to be "willful" or "intentional" in order to qualify as neglect. This standard is inconsistent with federal statute, the laws of more than 40 other states, and Rhode Island's own statute protecting persons with developmental disabilities, all of which define neglect based on **failure to provide necessary care**, not intent. As a result, similarly situated individuals receive different legal protections based solely on age or disability status.

This inconsistency creates a significant and harmful loophole. We know from research and lived experience that neglect in healthcare and long-term care settings most often stems from **systemic failures**, including chronic understaffing, insufficient training, and inadequate access to supplies, not from malicious intent by individual workers. Yet the current statutory framework allows facilities to evade accountability even when residents suffer harm due to unmet basic needs, simply by asserting that the neglect was not intentional.

From an equity perspective, there is no justification for maintaining a legal standard that tolerates preventable harm so long as intent cannot be proven. Neglect causes real and lasting consequences for older adults and people with disabilities, many of whom are women and caregivers themselves, and many of whom already face barriers to accessing timely, quality healthcare. Equal protection under the law should not depend on a person's age, disability status, or ability to prove intent after harm has occurred.

H7488 would bring Rhode Island into alignment with federal standards and neighboring states by defining neglect based on outcomes and responsibilities, rather than intent. Doing so strengthens accountability while recognizing the realities of how neglect occurs in under-resourced systems.

We appreciate the Committee's consideration and its ongoing commitment to protecting the health, safety, and dignity of Rhode Islanders who rely on caregiving systems for their daily well-being.

The mission of the Women's Fund of Rhode Island is to invest in women and girls through advocacy, research, and strategic partnership designed to achieve gender equity through systemic change. Our [Women's Well-Being Index](#) compares how well women fare against men on topics related to health, safety, economic security, education, and civic participation in every RI city/town. Our [policy briefs](#) are written in response to the data found on the Index. You can find more about our work at www.wfri.org.