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TESTIMONY OF THE OFFICE OF THE PUBLIC DEFENDER REGARDING:

House Bill No. 7546

ENTITLED, AN ACT RELATING TO CRIMINAL PROCEDURE — ARREST

Chairwoman Hagan McEntee and Members of the House Judiciary Committee:

The Office of the Public Defender **opposes** House Bill No. 7546, which would include juvenile program workers and shift coordinators at the Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF) in the definition of peace officers, thereby granting them the power to make arrests. While our office respects the work that DCYF does to support vulnerable children and families, in our view the proposed legislation fails to recognize the inherently rehabilitative nature of the juvenile justice system.

Unlike the Adult Correctional Institutions, which is primarily a punitive facility, the Rhode Island Training School (RITS) is just that—a school. The RITS handbook states: “The Training School provides secure care to youth who are detained or adjudicated by order of the Family Court. . . . Our commitment to you is to provide the highest quality of care in a safe and respectful environment.”¹

DCYF Juvenile Program Workers and Shift Coordinators play an essential role in the rehabilitation of youth at the RITS. They are there to guide and teach, not to prosecute. In situations where investigation or arrest is necessary, the Rhode Island State Police, who are specially trained in these matters, can be quickly called upon. Giving DCYF staff the power to arrest children in their care would undoubtedly undermine the rehabilitative process, eroding the children’s trust in the Juvenile Program Workers and Shift Coordinators. Rather than viewing staff as supportive figures, children would see them as adversaries.

In short, granting DCYF staff arrest powers risks blurring the lines between social work and law enforcement, potentially compromising the integrity of both. Instead of extending arrest powers to non-law enforcement staff, our office would encourage a focus on enhanced training

¹ DCYF, Division of Youth Development, *Rhode Island Training School/Youth Development Center: Resident Handbook*, March 2025, available at https://dcyf.ri.gov/sites/g/files/xkgbur416/files/2025-04/RITS%20Resident%20Handbook_English.pdf, (last accessed March 23, 2026).

and support for DCYF staff in conflict resolution, de-escalation, and trauma-informed care. This would better equip them to manage difficult situations without resorting to law enforcement measures. The Office of the Public Defender urges the Committee to reconsider H7546.

Sincerely,

/s/ Angela M. Yingling

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