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ACLU OF RI POSITION: SUPPORT/AMEND

TESTIMONY ON 26-H 7216, CREATING A SPECIAL LEGISLATIVE COMMISSION TO ADDRESS CONCERNS IN THE DELIVERY OF HEALTHCARE TO INDIVIDUALS IN THE CUSTODY OF THE RHODE ISLAND DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS April 2, 2026

This resolution creates a nine-member special legislative commission with the purpose of studying and providing recommendations for the improvement and delivery of health care services at the Rhode Island Department of Corrections (RIDOC). The ACLU of Rhode Island supports this resolution and its goal of examining the need for improvements to health care services for those in the custody of RIDOC.

The resolution notes that “a lack of consistent and adequate medical treatment can have disastrous and fatal consequences.” Page 2, lines 2-3. According to the U.S. Department of Justice, 27 inmates died by suicide in Rhode Island prisons between 2001 and 2019.¹ In 2024, the ACLU of Rhode Island filed suit against the ACI on behalf of the families of three individuals who died by suicide within the span of five months while in the custody of the ACI. Two of them were suffering from withdrawal symptoms of substance use disorder, and the third person had a known history of severe mental illness. Our office regularly receives complaints from prisoners alleging the receipt of inadequate medical care. However valid any individual case may or may not be, there can be no question that there is room for improvement in ACI health care delivery.

We believe that expanding mental health care for all individuals within the custody of RIDOC, adequately addressing substance use disorder withdrawal symptoms, and improving overall access to necessary medical care is critical. Otherwise, we risk further preventable deaths and suffering for incarcerated individuals. As such, we see the importance of the creation of this commission.

Having said that, we strongly urge an amendment to the composition of the commission. While we applaud the presence of two representatives from inmates’ rights groups, we note that medical representation comes solely from state agencies. We believe that the participation of independent outside medical sources – such as a representative from the Rhode Island Medical Society and another professional medical organization – is not only appropriate under the circumstances, but necessary to give the commission the credibility it deserves.

Thank you for considering our views.

¹ Page 19, <https://bjs.ojp.gov/sites/g/files/xyckuh236/files/media/document/sljisfp0019st.pdf>