

# OFFICE OF THE PUBLIC DEFENDER

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April 2, 2026

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

### **House Bill 8074**

### **ENTITLED, AN ACT RELATING TO CRIMINALS—CORRECTIONAL INSTITUTIONS -- COMMISSION ON PARDONS**

Chairwoman Hagan McEntee and Members of the House Judiciary Committee:

The Office of the Public Defender **strongly supports** the passage of H8074, which would create a commission on pardons that would be tasked with administering the application process, considering applicants, and ultimately making recommendations to the governor regarding applicants seeking an executive pardon pursuant to the Rhode Island Constitution.

Although the R.I. Constitution allows for pardons, this has been an historically underused provision in our system. While there is no central database concerning the granting of pardons in this state, Rhode Island has been termed a “low clemency” state by the National Council for Incarcerated & Formerly Incarcerated Women and Girls.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the last time a Rhode Island governor issued a pardon was in 2011 when Governor Chafee granted a complete and full pardon to man hanged in 1845 (John Gordon).

Pardons are an important tool in the criminal justice system, and while we anticipate that the issuance of a pardon would still be a relatively rare occurrence, the creation of a commission would both help formalize the process and ensure that this tool is used to overturn unjust outcomes and allow deserving individuals to fully re-enter their communities, no longer facing the housing and employment barriers faced by the formerly convicted.

Creating this commission would put us in line with many other states, including neighboring Connecticut, which has a similar system and issues pardons each year with no increase in crime rates as a result.<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, the OPD strongly supports the passage of H8074.

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<sup>1</sup> Steve Ahlquist, *Clemency tour comes to Rhode Island with march on women’s prison in Cranston*, UPRISE RI, July 12, 2021, available at <https://upriseri.com/free-her-clemency-works/#:~:text=%E2%80%9CIn%20Rhode%20Island%2C%E2%80%9D%20say,Fund%2C%20and%20Justice%20for%20Housing> (last accessed April 2, 2026).

<sup>2</sup> State of Connecticut Board of Pardons and Paroles, *At a Glance Report 2024*, available at <https://portal.ct.gov/das/-/media/das/communications/communications-list-docs/digest/digest->

Sincerely,

/s/ Angela M. Yingling

Angela M. Yingling

Legislative Liaison

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[2023-2024/pardons-and-paroles-board-of.pdf?rev=e135a924633a4df48bede6d1e3b34ef9#:~:text=In%20FY%202023%2D2024%2C%20the%20Board%20held%2048%20pardons%20hearing,through%20the%20expedited%20pardon%20process](#), (last accessed April 2, 2026).