



**Testimony in Support  
H8328 - Virtual Hearings  
*April 9, 2026***

The Latino Policy Institute (LPI) strongly supports H8328, introduced by Representative Diaz, which would ensure that all Rhode Island courts offer virtual and remote hearings to residents. In late 2025, following an incident where ICE agents attacked an intern at the Supreme Court of Rhode Island, Justice Suttel issued an administrative order allowing individuals to request court hearings. Since then, the Office of Access to Justice has implemented a process for these requests. However, because this decision falls under administrative authority, it could change with shifts in leadership. Passing this bill would make remote hearings available as law for all Rhode Islanders.

Since last year, LPI, in collaboration with the Immigrant Coalition of RI, has been at the forefront of efforts to streamline systems and coordinate volunteer initiatives for individuals seeking virtual hearings for various reasons, regardless of their immigration status. The advocacy for court protections began in 2017, when ICE began arresting individuals attending court across the nation, including in Rhode Island. The challenges highlighted during the 2020 global pandemic showed that courts successfully accommodated thousands of individuals through virtual hearings, demonstrating that this system is effective for both parties involved.

Importantly, this bill does not alter the court's discretion to accept or deny a request for a hearing. It simply allows individuals to seek a remote hearing, with a requirement that they provide a stated reason if their request is denied, and ensures that these reasons are documented. The Office of Access to Justice has not clearly established this protocol in the past, which adds further significance to the bill.

Additionally, the bill grants remote hearings the same legal validity as in-person hearings, preventing any discrimination against those who choose to appear remotely. Clients will retain all constitutional rights that safeguard their access to justice, including the provision of translation services and assistance for individuals with disabilities, those who are hard of hearing, or those with other similar needs.

Virtual hearings serve as a vital pathway to justice for all communities in Rhode Island. They break down barriers related to accessibility, emergency medical situations, childcare needs, and fears of ICE detention. Currently, many individuals opt not to attend their court hearings, sometimes out of necessity to protect themselves from ICE. This situation reflects a profound injustice, one that this bill seeks to rectify by ensuring safe and equitable access to the judicial system for everyone.