



**Testimony Re: House Bill 8328 Re: *Rhode Island Voting Rights Act*
House Judiciary Committee**

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Madam Chair and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today. Rhode Island KIDS COUNT would like to voice its strong support for House Bill 8328 and thank Representative Diaz for sponsoring this bill and Representatives Slater, Biah, Alzate, J. Lombardi, Hull, Potter, and Edwards for co-sponsoring. This bill allows courts across Rhode Island to hold hearings remotely and lets any party or attorney participate by phone or video, with those appearances treated the same as if they were in person.

Currently, there is an administrative order in place allowing individuals to request a virtual hearing. This administrative order was issued in 2025 after an incident at the Rhode Island Supreme Court involving ICE agents. While helpful, this administrative order is not permanent and can change with leadership. This bill would make the option to request remote hearings law. It does not change the court's authority to approve or deny requests, but ensures individuals have the ability to ask.

This bill also improves transparency. If a request for a remote hearing is denied, a reason must be provided and recorded. Currently, that process is not clearly defined, which can leave people without answers. This bill also ensures that remote hearings carry the same legal standing as in-person hearings. All constitutional protections remain in place, including access to interpretation services and accommodations for individuals with disabilities or other needs.

For many Rhode Islanders, there are real barriers to attending court in person—child care responsibilities, medical issues, physical disabilities, transportation challenges, and, for some, fear of encountering ICE. These are not easily surmountable barriers, and they directly impact whether someone can participate in their own case. Currently, some individuals are not appearing in court at all because they cannot or do not feel safe doing so. **As a result, decisions are being made without their participation.** That is not what justice should look like.

Virtual hearings are not a replacement for in-person proceedings, but they are a valuable tool to make our courts more accessible and equitable.

We urge the General Assembly to make court hearings more accessible to all individuals. Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony.