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March 27, 2024

The Honorable Arthur J. Corvese, Chair  
House Committee on Labor

RE: Testimony in Support of H7579, An Act Relating to Labor and Labor Relations-  
Minimum Wages

United Way of Rhode Island (UWRI) is writing to express its support for House Bill 7579. 211, UWRI's social service referral network, receives calls for help from Rhode Islanders every day who are struggling to make ends meet and now requesting assistance paying for housing and food. Rhode Island nonprofits are working hard to meet those needs, but it is imperative to support individuals and families before they reach a crisis. Raising wages as detailed in H7579 is a crucial step towards economic empowerment for the members of our community most in need of stability.

According to the Economic Progress Institute, 61% of single adults in Rhode Island cannot afford to meet their basic needs, and 70% of single parents with two children cannot afford to meet their basic needs. This is entirely unacceptable and entirely preventable. When single adults cannot afford safe housing and healthy food their health suffers, which begins a cycle of missed wages and debt that can quickly become disastrous. When parents cannot afford their basic needs, those effects are amplified in their children who experience higher rates of physical and mental illness, school absenteeism, and low economic stability later in life. It is time to break the cycle of poverty by addressing the minimum wage that has kept Rhode Islanders poor.

Raising the minimum wage is an issue of equity; minimum wage jobs are disproportionately worked by women and people of color. Consider the industries that benefit from paying their employees the least: childcare, retail, food service, hospitality, cleaning, and agriculture. These industries employ adults who pay for housing and food, not primarily teens living with their parents like the stereotype suggests. Another myth is that increasing the minimum wage will be catastrophic for small businesses, leading to job losses and increased prices for consumers. This has been debunked countless times, most successfully by the Economic Progress Institute.

When Rhode Island raises the minimum wage this year and schedules increases in future years, I will be proud that we have demonstrated our commitment to fairness, equity, and economic prosperity for all of my neighbors. Please consider United Way of Rhode Island's full support of House bill 7579 in your deliberation.

Very best,  
Peggy Desjarlais  
United Way of Rhode Island

