

Testimony in Support of House Bill H7291
Regarding Union Orientation Rights for Newly Hired Employees

Sunday, April 12, 2026

Chairperson and Members of the Committee,

My name John Vota, and I'm the Treasurer and Local Member Organizer for Community College of Rhode Island Professional Staff Association (CCRI-PSA). I respectfully submit this testimony in strong support of House Bill H7291. This legislation represents a practical, balanced, and necessary step to ensure that public employees are fully informed of their rights, benefits, and workplace protections from the very beginning of their employment; particularly those in Rhode Island's public higher education system.

At its core, this bill guarantees that newly hired bargaining unit employees are provided with at least thirty minutes of in-person time with their union during new employee orientation, free from employer presence. While this may appear procedural, its impact on employee rights, workplace transparency, and institutional stability is substantial.

A union representative is not just someone employees turn to in conflict, through this multi-stage role they are a continuous advocate and advisor who ensures fairness, transparency, and opportunity at every stage of an employee's career; all while working alongside the employee across their entire employment lifecycle. I've seen the benefits that this brief time provides at the start of an employee's career, and I've seen the confusion and misinformation that the prolonged absence of this valued time creates.

First, this provision ensures that employees receive accurate, complete, and timely information about their labor rights. In today's post-Janus v. AFSCME environment, union membership is a voluntary decision. However, for that decision to be meaningful, it must be informed. Without guaranteed access to union representatives, many employees, especially those new to public service or higher education, may never fully understand the benefits, protections, and representation available to them. This bill corrects that imbalance by ensuring that all employees have equal access to that information.

Second, the requirement that non-union personnel be absent during this orientation period is critical to protecting employee autonomy. It creates a space where workers can ask questions freely, without fear of surveillance, pressure, or retaliation; whether real or perceived. This is not about excluding employers; rather, it is about ensuring that employees can engage in open dialogue about their workplace rights in a setting that respects their freedom of association.

Third, House Bill H7291 integrates union orientation into the standard onboarding process. At institutions like CCRI, where employees span a wide range of roles, from

academic support staff to facilities personnel, clear communication at the outset of employment is essential. By embedding union access into orientation, this bill removes the barriers related to scheduling, awareness, or access, and ensures that all union employees, regardless of department or shift, receive the same foundational information.

From an institutional perspective, this provision strengthens, not weakens, our public colleges. At CCRI, where recruitment and retention of qualified staff remain an ongoing challenge, ensuring that employees feel informed, supported, and connected from day one of employment is essential. Employees who understand their workplace rights and resources are more likely to remain engaged, resolve issues constructively, and contribute to a stable and productive work environment. This ultimately benefits students, who rely on consistent, experienced staff to support their academic success.

Importantly, this bill also accounts for workplaces where formal orientation may not exist. By requiring employers to provide coverage and coordinate time for union access, it ensures that no union employee is excluded. This is especially relevant in environments, where decentralized hiring and varied work schedules can otherwise lead to inconsistent onboarding experiences.

Fourth and finally, this legislation promotes fairness and transparency. It recognizes that both employers and unions play a role in shaping the employee experience and ensures that new hires hear from both perspectives in a structured and respectful manner. This provision is not new or experimental; it is aligned with proven models that ensure employees receive accurate information about their rights from the onset. California, New York, Washington, Oregon, and New Jersey already guarantee union access to new employee orientations, often including paid time and structured onboarding sessions.

In closing, House Bill H7291 strengthens Rhode Island employee rights, supports informed decision-making, and contributes to a more stable and effective public workforce. For institutions like CCRI, it represents an investment in people, and an investment that pays dividends in employee retention, workplace culture, and student success.

I respectfully urge the Committee to support and pass House Bill H7291. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

John D. Vota

Treasurer, CCRI Professional Staff Association