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To: House Committee on Municipal Government & Housing, RI General Assembly

Re: Support for H5375

Date: 4/22/25

Dear Chair Casey, members of the committee,

Thank you for hearing our testimony. My name is DeeAnn Guo, and I am a community organizer with the Childhood Lead Action Project. We are a non-profit organization founded in 1992 with the mission of eliminating lead poisoning in RI through parent support, advocacy, and grassroots organizing.

We support HB5375, which was developed in collaboration with the City of Providence, and we are currently in conversation with the Rhode Island Department of Health about some small clarifications as well.

As you may know, cities and states across the country have been replacing old lead service lines, the pipes that carry water into our homes. According to the Rhode Island Department of Health Office of Drinking Water Quality, Rhode Island received over \$28,650,000 dollars in 2024 alone through the Drinking Water State Revolving Fund specifically for lead service line inventories and replacements, with an estimated total of \$142,950,000 from FY2022-2026. There are additional hundreds of millions of dollars available through the DWSRF Main and Supplemental Pools, which water systems may apply for.

Since 2022, this money has been committed for use across the state (Providence, East Providence, Woonsocket, Pascoag, Newport, Pawtucket, North Kingstown, Westerly, Warwick, Harrisville). The period of the grant is still not over, and the amendments passed to the Lead Poisoning Prevention Act in 2023 state a commitment to the replacement of all lead service lines in our state within 10 years.

Presently, there is a great opportunity to address issues of access and efficiency in lead service line replacement programs as they are being developed and implemented. One problem that we have already seen in Providence is a lower participation rate (a 2024 analysis of Phase 1.1 of Providence Water's program found a 60% participation rate of owner occupied homes compared to 46% in rented homes) in rented homes than owner-occupied homes, and data from around the country lines up with this.

Homeowners must sign off on lead service line replacements, so unresponsive landlords (which would be defined in municipal ordinances) leave tenants at a loss with no option but to continue using their lead pipes. This bill would allow municipalities affected by this problem to pass ordinances to give tenants the right to sign off, given that proper notice has been provided to the landlord and they still do not respond.

To be clear, this is enabling legislation that will allow cities to take action. This does not dictate how water utilities should conduct lead service line replacements, only that there is an option to give tenants the right to sign off on a replacement when their landlord does not respond. The ordinances written by the city would spell out more of the details, and they can be customized to each city's unique needs. We have been in discussion with the city councils of both Providence and Central Falls, so there is buy-in from multiple cities. To preemptively address some concerns, the bill states that this only applies to free replacements, so there is no cost to the owner.

These kinds of ordinances would also not incur any additional costs to the city or the water utility. In fact, costs for municipal water utilities will be decreased, as it is well known across the country that replacing lead service lines is most efficient proceeding in a systematic way— street by street, house by house, rather than doing houses across neighborhoods whenever somebody signs up.

We are encouraged by results of a similar program in Newark, where 74% of residents are renters. Their City Council passed an ordinance that allowed them to access the private property without owner sign off (following a law passed by the New Jersey legislature that enabled such ordinances). In a statement by Kareem Adeem, Newark Water's director, he said "While at first, this might feel like government overreach, it saved us an enormous amount of time tracking down landlords, getting their permission, and gaining access. Renters mustn't be at the mercy of landlords to get the purest water possible." This led their crews to be able to repair up to 120 pipes a day with 25 crews working around the city, going line by line, block by block.

As a reminder, lead is a toxin that can cause irreversible damage, and there is no safe level of lead exposure. We need to remove barriers to our replacement programs as much as possible now, streamlining access, maximizing participation of eligible homes so that we can look back at our lead service line replacements as a success story. This bill opens up a path for cities with high renter populations to ensure that tenants— people drinking the water, and people ultimately at risk— have a say in whether their lead pipes get replaced. Tenants deserve a voice in their families' health; let's make sure they have a way to move forward when necessary.

Thank you.

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