



February 26, 2025

In Support of H 5379 – Commission on Pardons

Chairperson, members of the committee, and esteemed colleagues,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today in support of H 5379, which establishes a Commission on Pardons to ensure a fairer, more transparent, and equitable process for individuals seeking clemency in Rhode Island. I am Kyle Bennett, Chief of Staff and Public Affairs Officer at United Way of Rhode Island, and I am providing testimony to underscore the urgent need for policies that confront and correct the systemic inequities embedded in our criminal legal system.

For too long, people of color—particularly Black, Indigenous and Latino communities—have faced disproportionate sentencing, harsher penalties, and limited access to justice within both our state and national court systems. The consequences of these disparities extend far beyond incarceration; they perpetuate cycles of economic instability, civic disenfranchisement, and generational hardship.

H 5379 is an important step toward addressing these inequities. By establishing a Commission on Pardons, Rhode Island is creating a pathway for individuals who have served their time to seek clemency with a process that is transparent, accessible, and grounded in equity. This bill is about ensuring that the scales of justice are balanced not just in theory, but in practice—especially for those who have been unfairly impacted by historical biases.

Why This Matters for Equity in Rhode Island

1. **Historical Disparities in Sentencing and Convictions:** Decades of data show that people of color are more likely to receive longer sentences for similar offenses compared to their white counterparts. Establishing clear guidelines and equitable review processes for pardons helps rectify the injustices embedded in past sentencing practices.
2. **Breaking Barriers to Employment and Economic Stability:** A criminal record—even for minor, nonviolent offenses—creates lifelong barriers to employment, housing, and education, disproportionately impacting Black and Latino Rhode Islanders. By expanding pathways for pardons, this bill allows individuals to reintegrate into society, contribute to the workforce, and support their families without the weight of past convictions holding them back.
3. **Restoring Civic Participation and Strengthening Communities:** Rhode Island cannot claim to have an equitable democracy when thousands of residents, particularly people of color, are excluded from civic life due to past convictions. Providing fair access to pardons is not just about justice—it's about ensuring that every Rhode Islander has the opportunity to fully engage in their community, vote, and build a better future.

Uniting our community and resources to build racial equity and opportunities for all Rhode Islanders



4. Aligning with National Best Practices in Criminal Justice Reform: States across the country are recognizing that outdated, punitive policies disproportionately harm communities of color and fail to improve public safety. Rhode Island has an opportunity to be a leader in justice reform by establishing a commission that prioritizes fairness, transparency, and equity in clemency decisions.

At United Way of Rhode Island, we are committed to dismantling systemic barriers and advancing policies that promote racial and economic justice. H 5379 represents a meaningful step in that direction—one that acknowledges past harms, corrects systemic failures, and paves the way for a more just Rhode Island. I urge this committee to support and pass H 5379 to ensure that every Rhode Islander—regardless of race or background—has a fair chance at justice, redemption, and opportunity.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I welcome any questions you may have.

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