



April 24, 2025

**AAA NORTHEAST TESTIMONY BEFORE THE HOUSE STATE GOVERNMENT AND ELECTIONS COMMITTEE ON HOUSE BILL 5731, ALLOWING FOR VIRTUAL, INSTRUCTOR-LED DRIVER EDUCATION AS AN OPTION IN RHODE ISLAND**

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GOOD AFTERNOON, CHAIRMAN SHANLEY AND COMMITTEE MEMBERS. I'M MARY MAGUIRE, VICE PRESIDENT OF PUBLIC AND GOVERNMENT AFFAIRS AT AAA NORTHEAST, AND I APPRECIATE THE OPPORTUNITY TO PROVIDE WRITTEN TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HOUSE BILL 5731, WHICH WOULD MAKE VIRTUAL, INSTRUCTOR -LED DRIVER EDUCATION AN **OPTION** HERE IN THE OCEAN STATE. I'D LIKE TO THANK REPRESENTATIVE FOGARTY FOR SPONSORING THIS BILL, AND REPRESENTATIVES HULL, CARSON, DIAZ, BENNETT, CORTVRIEND, ALZATE, KAZARIAN AND CALDWELL FOR BEING AMONG THE CO-SPONSORS.

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AAA HAS BEEN DEEPLY COMMITTED TO TEEN DRIVER SAFETY FOR MORE THAN ONE HUNDRED-TWENTY YEARS, AND WE HAVE TAUGHT DRIVER TRAINING IN RHODE ISLAND FOR MORE THAN SEVENTY FIVE YEARS. THE SAFETY OF OUR NEWEST DRIVERS IS PARAMOUNT FOR US, AND WE VIEW VIRTUAL, INSTRUCTOR-LED DRIVER ED AS YET ANOTHER INROAD FOR REACHING YOUNG DRIVERS AND THEIR PARENTS. THIS BILL WOULD ALLOW FOR VIRTUAL, INSTRUCTOR-LED DRIVER EDUCATION TO BE OFFERED AS AN **OPTION—ONLY AN OPTION**—IN RHODE ISLAND, AND I'D LIKE TO STRESS THAT THIS BILL WOULD **NOT REPLACE** TRADITIONAL CLASSROOM DRIVER ED PROGRAMS. IT SIMPLY PROVIDES AN **ALTERNATIVE** FOR BUSY STUDENTS AND THEIR EQUALLY BUSY

FAMILIES AND CARETAKERS, ESPECIALLY THOSE WHO LIVE IN RURAL COMMUNITIES WHERE IT MAY BE HARDER TO ACCESS **STATE-RUN TRADITIONAL CLASSROOM SESSIONS.**

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DURING THE PANDEMIC, STUDENTS COULD ONLY TAKE DRIVER EDUCATION VIRTUALLY, AND THE FORMAT PROVED TO **BE VERY EFFECTIVE.** OUR AAA DRIVER TRAINING PROGRAM TEACHES THE TRADITIONAL CLASSROOM FORMAT, AND DURING THE PANDEMIC, WE TAUGHT ALMOST ONE-HUNDRED VIRTUAL CLASSES TO MORE THAN 23-HUNDRED RHODE ISLAND STUDENTS. WE FOUND THAT OUR VIRTUALLY-TRAINED STUDENTS' AVERAGE TEST SCORES WERE **ALMOST IDENTICAL TO WHAT THEY WERE BEFORE COVID.** AS THIS BILL ASSERTS, OUR AAA PRE-PANDEMIC TRADITIONAL CLASSROOM SCORES AVERAGED NINETY-POINT-NINETY FOUR PERCENT, VERSUS EIGHTY-NINE-POINT FIFTY EIGHT PERCENT FOR VIRTUAL LEARNERS.

WE REALIZE THAT VIRTUAL, INSTRUCTOR-LED TRAINING MAY NOT WORK FOR **ALL** STUDENTS, AND THAT MANY YOUNG DRIVERS **PREFER** THE CLASSROOM SETTING. BUT WE ALL LEARN DIFFERENTLY, AND MANY STUDENTS AND THEIR PARENTS TELL US THEY LEARN **BETTER VIRTUALLY—ESPECIALLY IF THEY HAVE A PHYSICAL, EMOTIONAL, OR LEARNING CHALLENGE.** WE ALSO VIEW THIS AS AN **EQUITY ISSUE:** NOT EVERYONE HAS ACCESS TO A DRIVER ED CLASSROOM CLOSE TO WHERE THEY LIVE, AND THE VIRTUAL OPTION MAKES DRIVER TRAINING AVAILABLE TO ANYONE WITH **COMPUTER ACCESS.** MANY WORKING PARENTS AND CARETAKERS CANNOT LEAVE THEIR JOBS TO DRIVE THEIR STUDENT TO CLASS--AND VIRTUAL TRAINING **LEVELS THE PLAYING FIELD FOR THOSE WITHOUT TRANSPORTION—AGAIN, ENHANCING EQUITY.** I'VE BEEN A WORKING PARENT ALL MY LIFE, AND IF MY MOTHER-IN-LAW HAD NOT BEEN AVAILABLE TO DRIVE MY YOUNGER SON TO DRIVER ED, I WOULD HAVE BEEN **HARD-PRESSED TO GET HIM TO CLASSES.**

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AS YOU MAY KNOW, RHODE ISLAND DOES NOT REQUIRE IN-CAR TRAINING AS PART OF THE OVERALL DRIVER ED REQUIREMENT—ONLY **CLASSROOM TRAINING** FOR SIXTEEN AND SEVENTEEN YEAR OLDS. YOUNG DRIVERS CAN WAIT UNTIL AGE EIGHTEEN TO APPLY FOR A PERMIT AND GET A LICENSE WITH NO FORMAL CLASSROOM TRAINING OR BEHIND-THE-WHEEL PRACTICE TIME. RESEARCH SHOWS THAT IT CAN TAKE UP TO FIVE YEARS TO GAIN THE DRIVING EXPERIENCE THAT HELPS US MANAGE THE RISKS ASSOCIATED WITH DRIVING. OUR TEENS—OUR MOST INEXPERIENCED AND AT-RISK DRIVERS—WOULD BENEFIT FROM AS MUCH EDUCATION AS WE ARE ABLE TO PROVIDE, AND A VIRTUAL OPTION IS ANOTHER USEFUL TOOL FOR EXPANDING ACCESS TO DRIVER ED AND FOSTERING SAFER YOUNG DRIVERS—DRIVERS WHO HAVE NO BEHIND-THE-WHEEL REQUIREMENT IN THIS STATE, WHO CAN BENEFIT FROM AS MUCH DRIVER TRAINING AS POSSIBLE—VIRTUAL OR OTHERWISE. THIS IS AN OPTION THAT OFFERS **CHOICE AND CONVENIENCE** FOR THE BUSY WORKING FAMILIES OF THE OCEAN STATE, AND **IT'S AN OPTION WHOSE TIME HAS COME—AT A TIME WHEN VIRTUALLY EVERY OTHER FORM OF EDUCATION IS OFFERED IN A VIRTUAL FORMAT.** IN CLOSING, I'LL ADD JUST ONE COMMENT—THIS BILL PROPOSES A TWO-YEAR **PILOT CULMINATING IN A FULL REPORT. WHY NOT GIVE THIS SENSIBLE OPTION A WELL-DESERVED TRY FOR A FINITE PERIOD OF TIME?**

MR. CHAIRMAN, ONCE AGAIN, THANK YOU FOR THE OPPORTUNITY TO TESTIFY ON THIS CRITICALLY IMPORTANT BILL.