



From: Carol Anne Costa, ED and Maureen Maigret Chief Policy Advisor - SACRI

In Re: House Bill 7995 – Office of the Elder Advocate

March 16, 2026

Dear Chairman, Shanley and Members of the Committee on State Government and Elections,

SACRI is writing today to express strong support for H-7995, the establishment of the **Office of the Elder Advocate**. As Rhode Island's population of older adults continues to grow at a rapid pace, it is imperative that our state infrastructure evolves to protect the rights, dignity, and autonomy of our seniors by protecting their rights, when required, through legal representation.

While Rhode Island has made strides in supporting those in licensed long-term care facilities through the RI Ombudsman program, a significant majority of our seniors live independently or in community-based housing. Currently, these individuals lack a centralized, independent legal authority to turn to when their rights are in jeopardy. This bill bridges that gap.

SACRI supports this legislation for the following reasons:

- **Holistic Advocacy:** This office will address the "fragmented" nature of current services by providing a single point of contact for issues ranging from age discrimination, property rights, extended behavioral health holds, financial guardianship, taxation issues, and housing stability.
- **Systemic Oversight:** Beyond individual complaints, Section 42-66.14-5 empowers the Advocate to identify and fix systemic gaps in state programs, ensuring that Rhode Island's largest swath of population people over 60, is met with proactive solutions rather than reactive and often disjointed fixes.
- **Autonomy which is Non-duplicitous:** Currently the Office of Healthy Aging (OHA) manages a "volunteer guardianship program" focuses on health guardianships. An Edler Advocate is an independent legal authority which is enabled through this statute to protect the other rights often impacted when an older adult is suddenly sickened, injured or hospitalized, who may be without family support. This advocate acts to protect property rights, civil rights and human rights, currently not done through the OHA volunteer guardianship program.

- **Legal Protections and Access:** By providing an advocate who is a member of the bar with specific expertise in elder law, and by exempting represented older adults from court fees (Section 42-66.14-11), this bill removes the financial and procedural barriers that often prevent our elders from seeking justice.
- **Confidentiality and Trust:** The strict confidentiality protocols outlined in the bill ensure that vulnerable seniors can seek help without fear of exposure or retaliation.

Older Rhode Islanders have spent their lives contributing to our economy and our communities. They deserve an independent watchdog who ensures they are not forgotten by the systems meant to serve them.

SACRI respectfully urges the Committee to pass this legislation to ensure that every older adult in our state has a dedicated voice in RI.

Sincerely,

Carol Costa, Executive Director, SACRI

Maureen Maignet, Chief Policy Advisor, SACRI