

April 6, 2026

Dear Senator McKenney,

We are writing this letter in support of S2686 which creates the Office of the Elder Advocate.

My wife Janet and I are retired older adults with almost one hundred combined years of experience working with older adult populations. Over the years we realize that older adults have unique strengths, abilities, needs, and desires. Over the course of one's life many will interact with complex health care systems, seek housing, establish income support, navigate transportation, and may have advancing needs for community support.

Unfortunately, there may be times when older adults may get caught in conflict, exploitation, system redesigns, or seek resolution, when confronted with ageism or discrimination. They may face challenges in navigating our complex support systems to ensure their dignity and voice is heard in service access decisions. There are multiple state agencies or organizations available to assist, but none of them are independent or autonomous; especially when advocacy is needed for individuals lacking local family support or facing cognitive challenges as they age.

The Long-Term Care Ombudsman provides advocacy to assist residents in nursing homes or assisted living, the Mental Health Advocate supports individuals with behavioral health issues, while the Office of Health Aging provides protective services. The population supported by these advocates is both confined and limited.

Contrary to some concerns, the Office of Elder Advocate is not duplicative, as it would provide legal advocacy or case-specific assistance to elders caught in predicaments not of their own making. It would provide legal representation to a group of older adults. So, let's put to rest the notions of duplicity:

- The RI Long Term Care Ombudsman is NOT a Legal advocate. They investigate complaints for the small percentage of older adults receiving long-term services and supports.
- The Mental Health Advocate does not service people with primary dementia.
- Senior Centers DO NOT do this work.
- The Office of Healthy Aging does not provide direct legal representation for individuals.

Most of the 200,000 plus older adults in Rhode don't meet the necessary criteria to access these advocates and are living in the community.

They too need a voice.

Someone needs to monitor, evaluate and advocate for rights to those services and supports that older adults obtain. Someone needs to provide legal assistance and protect their civil rights. Someone needs to help those who have no one else available. That someone should be an Older Adult Advocate, who is independent and autonomous from any other agency.

Puerto Rico has an Elder People Advocate Office (Oficina del Procurador de las Personas de Edad Avanzada, or OPPEA). Several providences in Canada (British Columbia, Newfoundland, and New Brunswick) thought it necessary to pass legislation to establish an older adult advocate. Now is the time for Rhode Island to follow suit.

Sincerely,



Frank Spinelli



Janet Spinelli

18 Woodmont Drive
Cranston RI 02920