April 7, 2026

The Honorable Melissa Murray, Chair
Senate Health & Human Services Committee
Rhode Island State Senate
Providence, RI 02903

RE: TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF SENATE BILL S 2686 — AN ACT RELATING TO STATE AFFAIRS AND GOVERNMENT — THE OFFICE OF THE ELDER ADVOCATE

Chair Murray and Members of the Senate Health & Human Services Committee:

On behalf of United Way of Rhode Island, we strongly support **S 2686**, which would establish the **Office of the Elder Advocate** to promote the rights, dignity, and well-being of older Rhode Islanders across settings—particularly those living at home or in independent housing who may not be served by the long-term care ombudsman model. The bill creates an independent advocate with authority to receive and respond to complaints, drive systemic improvements, monitor agency responsiveness, convene stakeholders, and issue annual recommendations to state leadership.

United Way's policy and advocacy work is guided by our strategic framework: **Strong Families, Strong Nonprofits, Strong United Way**. We prioritize policies that strengthen household stability, expand access to opportunity, and ensure public systems deliver measurable value. This bill advances those priorities by strengthening protections for older adults as Rhode Island's aging population continues to grow. Rhode Island's Office of Healthy Aging notes that more than **24% of Rhode Islanders are age 60 or older**, highlighting the scale and urgency of building stronger, coordinated supports.

United Way also sees firsthand why a dedicated elder advocate matters. Through our partnership supporting Rhode Island's **Aging and Disability Resource Center (ADRC)**—a program of the Office of Healthy Aging supported by United Way—residents and caregivers receive help navigating benefits, housing stability, caregiving, and service access. A statewide Elder Advocate can strengthen accountability and ensure older adults have a clear pathway for rights protection and systemic problem-solving across agencies and programs.

Recommendations to strengthen implementation of S 2686:

1. **Formalize coordination across existing aging and protection systems.** The Elder Advocate should have clear coordination protocols with the Office of Healthy Aging, the Long-Term Care Ombudsman, Adult Protective Services and other relevant partners so individual cases are routed appropriately while systemic issues are elevated and addressed.
2. **Use real-time, statewide intake data to identify service gaps.** Incorporating aggregated trend insights from platforms like ADRC and 211 can help the Office identify emerging

pressure points (benefits access, housing instability, caregiver stress, and language barriers) and target recommendations accordingly.

3. **Ensure strong public accountability with adequate resources.** The bill's annual reporting requirement is a strength; pairing that with sufficient appropriations for staffing and outreach will determine whether the Office can meet the level of statewide need and operate as intended.

United Way of Rhode Island respectfully urges your support for **S 2686**. Establishing the Office of the Elder Advocate is a practical step to strengthen protections, improve coordination, and ensure older Rhode Islanders can age with dignity, stability, and support.

Sincerely,

Ellijah McLean
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United Way of Rhode Island