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**Testimony Re: Senate Bill 3143 Re: *Rhode Island Voting Rights Act*
Senate Judiciary Committee**

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Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today. Rhode Island KIDS COUNT would like to voice its strong support for Senate Bill 3143 and thank Senator Lawson for sponsoring this bill and Senators Gallo, Sosnowski, Murray, Gu, Urso, Ujifusa, Vargas, Lauria, and Kallman for co-sponsoring. This bill would establish the *Rhode Island Voting Rights Act*, creating processes to protect against discrimination in voting that would take effect January 1, 2027.

The *Rhode Island Voting Rights Act* builds on the federal *Voting Rights Act of 1965*—and in some ways goes further. Under this bill, a voting policy can be challenged based on how it impacts communities of color, even if there is no proof of intent to discriminate. It also includes protections to support voters who speak languages other than English. Overall, this bill helps make sure all Rhode Islanders—no matter their race, color, sex, age, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability, country of ancestral origin, or change in marital status—have a fair and equal opportunity to vote.

Throughout history there have been concerted efforts to disenfranchise voters, particularly voters of Color. And more recently the *Safeguard American Voter Eligibility (SAVE) Act* has been introduced at the federal level. This bill would require people to show proof of U.S. citizenship, such as a passport or birth certificate, when registering to vote or updating their registration. Rhode Island already has voter ID laws, but the *SAVE Act* goes further by requiring proof of citizenship. **Many eligible voters do not have these documents. They can be expensive and hard to get, especially for low-income families, women who have changed their names, and communities of Color.** This creates new barriers to registering and staying registered to vote, especially for people who move often or have trouble accessing official records.

This also bill protects voters from suppression and from practices that weaken their voting power. It creates tools to stop discriminatory voting policies before they take effect, instead of forcing communities to fix the harm after it has happened. For example, if a city or town has been found to have discriminated in the past, a court can require them to get approval before making future changes to voting policies. It also addresses voter dilution that can happen when voting maps or election systems are set up in ways that reduce the voting power of communities of color. The *Rhode Island Voting Rights Act* would create a mechanism where communities and organizations can take legal action against government entities, including cities, towns, or the state that are responsible for unfair or

discriminatory voting policies. The Attorney General can also take legal action under the *RIVRA*, but having a private right of action means that voters and organizations do not have to wait for the AG to do so. They can send a notice letter or go straight to court.

Finally, this bill also requires certain cities and towns to provide translated ballots, voting materials, and language assistance when enough voters speak a language other than English. It also requires bilingual poll workers and interpretation services to help voters participate fully in elections. For communities with smaller language minorities, it requires that certain voting materials be provided in languages other than English. Rhode Island is a diverse and multilingual state with over one-third of foreign-born residents Limited English Proficient (LEP).

Fair and free elections that allow all eligible citizens to cast a vote are fundamental to a healthy democracy. In our current political climate, where many institutions have lost credibility with the public, the ability to cast a vote must be protected.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony.