



February 15, 2022

Senator Cynthia A. Coyne
Chair, Senate Judiciary Committee
Rhode Island State House
Providence, RI 02903

Re: Testimony Supporting: S2007

To the Honorable Members of the Senate Judiciary Committee:

On behalf of the Housing Network of Rhode Island (HNRI), our member agencies and the low-income Rhode Islanders we seek to serve, I write in strong support for Bill S2007 (the ‘Let RI Vote’ Act), legislation that would codify changes to election laws to ensure everyone who is eligible to vote can do so safely, securely, and with appropriate accommodations for voters with disabilities. Bill S2007 will expand Rhode Islanders’ voting access, modernize our elections, and provide important voter resources like ballot drop-boxes and an official multilingual voter hotline.

The Housing Network of Rhode Island (HNRI) is the membership association for 17 nonprofit community development organizations. Our members operate and maintain safe, decent, and affordable homes for over 15,000 low- and moderate-income renters and homeowners across Rhode Island.

Low-income Rhode Islanders often balance precarious schedules as they juggle multiple jobs to meet their basic needs. Their flexibility becomes further strained if they require child care or have limited access to transportation. The vast majority of workers do not get the day off to vote, especially low-wage workers. This means low-income voters must choose between exercising their right to vote and meeting their basic needs.

Low-income renters vote at significantly lower rates than homeowners and higher-income households. In six national elections from 2008 – 2018, an average of 49% of renters reported voting compared to 60% of homeowners. When looking at household income, only 38% of households with incomes under \$20,000 per year reported voting in national elections in a ten-year period (2008 – 2018) (National Low Income Housing Coalition, 2020). Many of these low-income households are seniors, people with disabilities, and families with children, with the same right to vote as any other eligible voter, but lacking the same access to the ballot.

Emergency measures in the 2020 elections, including “no excuse” mail ballots and the option to vote early in-person allowed Rhode Islanders flexibility to choose the voting method that worked best for them. These measures resulted in a record turnout – over 522,000 Rhode Islanders voted in the

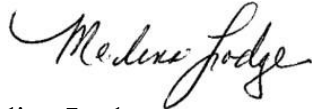
General Elections. Over 62% of voters casted their ballot by mail or early in-person compared to 38% at a polling place on Election Day in the 2020 General Election.

Voting should not be a hardship to anyone. Certainly, we believe this Committee will agree that eligible voters should not effectively be denied an intrinsic civil right because they are poor, or disabled, or come from a community targeted for oppression. It is beyond time to provide Rhode Islanders with greater choice and flexibility in how they vote, and to modernize and improve our elections administrative process.

The Let RI Vote Act (S2007) expands access and streamlines elections administrations by removing inefficiencies, including the arcane notary/witness requirement. It improves upon the distribution and curing process of mail ballots, ensuring continued election security. We urge the Committee to support this legislation that will strengthen our democratic processes and remove long-standing barriers to voting that low-income households have historically faced.

We want to acknowledge and thank Senators Euer, Coyne, Quezada, McCaffrey, Goodwin, Sosnowski, Miller, Archambault, Pearson, and Gallo for their sponsorship of this comprehensive legislation and leadership to expand voter access and improve the efficiency of our elections. We urge the Committee to Let RI Vote and recommend this legislation for passage.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Melina Lodge".

Melina Lodge
Executive Director
(401) 721-5680 x 38
mlodge@housingnetworkri.org