

RHODE ISLAND CIVIL LIBERTIES

NEWSLETTER OF THE ACLU FOUNDATION OF RI

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RHODE ISLANDERS SHOW UP FOR PRIVACY

The Summer of Pushing Back Against Surveillance Technology

As a result of the work of the ACLU of Rhode Island, our supporters, and Ocean State residents alarmed by the increasing technological erosion of privacy rights, this was a summer of canceling Flock Safety surveillance camera contracts. In the past two months, five towns have terminated their contracts with the automated license plate reader (ALPR) camera company: South Kingstown, Narragansett, Glocester, North Kingstown, and Foster.

Since mid-July, we have sent thousands of letters and emails to members and supporters when the issue of Flock Safety has been placed on their city or town council agenda. And Rhode Islanders responded, showing up at meetings and emailing their council members in force! At every meeting, residents have spoken thoughtfully about privacy, surveillance, and the lack of safeguards around this dangerous, quickly-expanding, and evolving technology.

We are now laying the groundwork for more contracts to be canceled. In the state's two largest cities, Providence and Pawtucket, the incumbent mayors who supported Flock cameras were defeated by challengers who indicated they wanted to revisit, and potentially cancel, their cities' existing contracts with Flock Safety. In anticipation of this shift in leadership, we have followed up with them and will continue to press them on their campaign comments.



In addition to the contracts cities and towns have with Flock Safety, the RI State Police (RISP) have installed cameras across the state, but most often only with the approval of the local police chief, rather than the municipal council. South Kingstown's town council, for example, did not even know there were State Police Flock cameras on their roads until they read a news report about the program. The response to this revelation has been heartening. *Cont'd on p. 2*

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Settlement in ACLU Lawsuit Reaffirms First Amendment Right of Protesters to Access State House Rotunda

The ACLU of RI has favorably settled a lawsuit to ensure the State House Rotunda will be open for use by the public, including those engaged in peaceful protest, immediately prior to, and during, the Governor's annual "State of the State" address. The settlement is an important reaffirmation of First Amendment rights in a space that has served for decades as a quintessential forum for free speech activity.

The lawsuit was filed in 2025 by ACLU of RI cooperating attorneys Lynette Labinger and Sonja Deyoe on behalf of activists who were denied access to the rotunda for a rally and also threatened with arrest immediately prior to that year's gubernatorial address by Governor Dan McKee. *Cont'd on p. 2*



Signage posted just prior to the 2025 Governor's State of the State address. Photo courtesy of Steve Ahlquist.

FROM THE DESK OF THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Days are getting shorter, but the amount of work to protect our liberties doesn't wane with the seasons. It was a busy summer in the office, as we worked tirelessly — and, thus far, quite successfully — to stem and reverse the proliferation of Flock Safety surveillance cameras across the state.

As the front page story notes, credit must also go to our members and fellow Rhode Islanders who showed they are very capable of making their voices heard. We are grateful to all of you who have participated in this campaign.

In addition, the midterm election is fast approaching. I hope you'll take a moment to check your voter registration, review your voting rights, consider being a poll monitor, and take a look at our nonpartisan candidate survey. You can find more info on p. 4.

Finally, we're looking forward to gathering on Thursday, November 12 for our Annual Meeting, where we'll honor a tireless champion of civil liberties in Rhode Island: Lise Iwon. I've had the honor of knowing Lise for many years, through many cycles of civil liberties wins and losses. Her work for children's and LGBTQ+ rights here in the Ocean State has been remarkable. I hope you'll join us for a special night to celebrate her work, socialize with other civil libertarians, and enjoy a drink on us.

– Steven Brown

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Rhode Islanders Show Up *Cont'd from p. 1*

South Kingstown, North Kingstown, and East Greenwich have asked that the RISP cameras in their municipalities get taken down. Westerly, North Smithfield, and Richmond have discussed making a similar request to the RISP.

Meanwhile, the ACLU has asked Cumberland to cancel their Flock contract upon learning of a lawsuit filed by a woman who was wrongfully arrested after the police department used a photo of her face taken by a Flock camera to (incorrectly) identify her.

Finally, our affiliate has been highlighting how Flock Safety and local police practices are not nearly as transparent as they claim to be. We posted a blog disclosing how local police “transparency portals” about their cameras often fail to include significant information, such as a list of the other police departments they share their camera data with across the state and country (sometimes more than a hundred!) We also disclosed how Flock Safety has intentionally removed its online information from the Wayback Machine, an internet resource that allows the public to go back and view previous versions of webpages. Flock has opted all of its pages out of the archive, making it impossible to track changes in the company's policies or claims about their products over time.

While Governor McKee has initiated a 60-day pause of new camera installations by the State Police amid a request for policy review, our work has continued. These wins at the municipal level have showcased the broad opposition to this surveillance, but we still need strong and meaningful laws to regulate, if not ban, ALPRs and similar technologies. We are hopeful that next legislative session will bring much-needed limits to these invasive surveillance systems.



One of the stacks of letters we sent to community members about Flock Safety discussions

Settlement Affirms State House Speech Rights *Cont'd from p. 1*

Upon arriving at the State House, Harrison Tuttle, who led the now-dissolved R.I. Black Lives Matter PAC, and others were advised that the Governor's office had instructed State Police and Capitol Police to prevent them from accessing the Rotunda and the upper floors of the State House. The Rotunda entrance was blocked off with a sign indicating that it had been reserved by the Governor's office from 4:30pm to 10pm. The ACLU of RI lawsuit argued that these actions were undertaken to stifle the protesters' exercise of their First Amendment rights to freedom of speech and assembly.

While the lawsuit was in progress, an agreement was reached in advance of the January 2026 “State of the State” address to allow protesters to access most of the State House Rotunda with safety protocols in place. That plan was codified in the settlement agreement filed in July. In addition to ensuring access to the rotunda by the public, the settlement includes a payment of legal fees by the State.

TRUMP ADMINISTRATION CASE UPDATES

Previous newsletters have reported on many of the lawsuits the ACLU of RI has participated in — often with other national and local groups — against the Trump administration, including multiple cases to protect federal grant funding for life-saving services in a variety of contexts. There are many updates to report on this month.

In August, we chalked up another victory in one of those grant cases. In addition, we joined with the National ACLU and other New England Affiliates this past month in filing three “friend of the court” briefs challenging the federal government’s attempts to control academic institutions and target students. Finally, in October, the federal appeals court in Boston will be hearing oral arguments in two other major cases that received favorable decisions in the federal court in Rhode Island. All these cases are briefly summarized below.

VICTORY IN CONTINUED FIGHT FOR UNTAINTED HEALTH AND HOUSING GRANTS

In *Rhode Island Coalition Against Domestic Violence v. Kennedy*, a federal judge in Rhode Island blocked federal grant conditions targeting groups supporting DEI and transgender rights imposed by the U.S. Departments of Health and Human Services and Housing and Urban Development. The court decision, which follows an earlier order preliminarily blocking the restrictions, restores critical services to people experiencing homelessness and victims of domestic violence. The suit was brought on behalf of a number of Rhode Island non-profit organizations and more than a dozen national anti-domestic violence groups.

“FRIEND OF THE COURT” BRIEFS

President and Fellows of Harvard College v. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services When the Trump administration attempted an ideological hostile takeover of Harvard University by withholding billions of dollars of research funding after the university refused to vet its students, faculty, and course offerings for “ideological diversity,” we joined with other organizations across the political spectrum in a brief urging the court to rule the administration’s actions unconstitutional. The same groups have filed a similar “friend of the court” brief in a companion case brought by the Harvard Chapter of the American Association of University Professors. The U.S. Court of Appeals in Boston will be hearing oral arguments in the cases in early October.

American Association of University Professors v. Rubio We joined four other ACLU affiliates and the National ACLU to urge the federal appeals court to grant relief in this challenge to the Trump administration’s deportation policies that target pro-Palestinian students exercising their First Amendment rights. A lower court ruled those efforts unlawful.



UPCOMING ARGUMENTS

On October 7, there will be court hearings in the U.S. Court of Appeals for the First Circuit in two critical cases. In *Rhode Island Latino Arts v. National Endowment for the Arts*, we will be defending a lower court decision that ruled unconstitutional a certification requirement for National Endowment for the Arts’ grants that required applicants to attest that they would not “promote gender ideology” in order to be eligible for funding. U.S. Senior District Court Judge William Smith held that this grant condition violates the First Amendment because it “promises to penalize artists based on their speech.” The government’s appeal of that decision will be heard.

The appeals court will also be hearing the government’s appeal in a lawsuit seeking to protect gender-affirming health care, *Child Advocate for the State of Rhode Island v. U.S.* In this case, the ACLU of RI and the Lawyers’ Committee for RI successfully sued to quash a subpoena issued by the U.S. Department of Justice seeking the sensitive private medical records of minor patients who have received medical treatment for gender dysphoria at Rhode Island Hospital.

MIDTERM ELECTIONS!

VOTING RIGHTS, POLL MONITORING, CANDIDATE SURVEY

Midterm Voting Deadlines

- Register to vote: Saturday, October 4
- Request a mail-in ballot: Tuesday, October 13
- Early Voting: October 14 – November 2
- General Election: Tuesday, November 3

Be a Poll Monitor

ACLU poll monitors serve a critical role by going to a designated voting location on election day to observe and record any issues that arise, and letting our office know. We resolve numerous election day problems as a result. ACLU of RI monitors are required to attend a virtual training before election day. If you want to be a poll monitor, let us know by emailing Megan at info@riaclu.org or by calling our office at 401-831-7171!



Know Your Voting Rights

Read and share our voting rights guide! It covers everything from who can vote, procedures for early voting and voting by mail, voting on election day, voter ID, and what to do if you have problems at the polls. Go to riaclu.org/vote or scan the QR code for digital and printable PDF versions of your voting rights in English and Spanish!



Read our Candidate Survey

Before you vote, see how candidates have responded to questions about key civil liberties issues! We sent a survey to all the state-wide offices (except General Treasurer) and Providence mayoral candidates with a dozen questions seeking their views on timely civil liberties matters. We heard back from many of them. Read their answers on our website at riaclu.org/candidates.

LEGAL UPDATES

Major Win for Civil Rights Litigation

Earlier this year, the ACLU of RI filed a brief in the state Supreme Court challenging the RI Attorney General's position that state officials are immune from suit under one of RI's key anti-discrimination civil rights statutes.

The lawsuit involves two men incarcerated at the ACI who allege that the Department of Corrections discriminated against them based on their disabilities, in violation of the Rhode Island Civil Rights Act (RICRA), by deliberately ignoring and exacerbating their medical conditions. In response, the Attorney General argued that the State had sovereign immunity from suit and therefore could engage in discriminatory acts without being sued under RICRA.

However, in July the court agreed with our position and rejected the AG's effort to avoid liability, ensuring that state officials can be sued for discrimination in federal court under this important civil rights law.

Warwick Doubles Down on Censorship

Two years ago, we sued Warwick on behalf of a resident, Robert Cote, who was barred from speaking at a City Council meeting about allegations of ethical misconduct by one of its members. Now, the City has asked the judge hearing that lawsuit to bar Cote from "disclosing the contents of or reproducing" any of the City's discovery responses in the case "on any social media platform or otherwise making such responses public in any way, including but not limited at City Council meetings." ACLU cooperating attorney Thomas W. Lyons has asked the court to reject this latest attempt by the City to infringe on Cote's freedom of speech in the lawsuit itself.



Cote being removed from a Warwick City Council meeting, July 2023

REPORT UPDATE: LOCAL GOVERNMENT REMOTE ACCESSIBILITY

How accessible are your city or town council or school committee meetings? We updated our report mapping the virtual public comment policies in Rhode Island municipal councils and school committees, so it's easier for you to find out!

Since our first report in 2023, there has been progress, but not as much as we had hoped. We again looked at four aspects of public meeting practices:

1. Do they livestream their meetings?
2. Do they record their meetings and provide a video archive of them?
3. Do they provide links to agenda item documents online?
4. Do they allow remote participation by the public?

On the positive side, nearly all councils and school committees livestream and record their meetings for later viewing, and that number has increased since 2023. In addition, most councils now post their agenda packets online in advance of their meetings. However, only about half of school committees post their agenda packets, and a few committees have moved backwards in no longer including that information. Finally, remote participation remains a barrier to remote accessibility, with a fraction of councils and only four school committees offering it.

Altogether, we found that 11 municipal councils and 3 school committees met all four standards of accessibility, while 2 city/town councils and 2 school committees met none. In this day and age, we believe that everyone should be able to participate remotely in these critical local levels of government.

If you want to learn more about your own community, we made a searchable table on our website with each city and town council and school committee policy, as of mid-2026, and a simple template you can use to contact your local officials to urge them to make their meetings more accessible virtually if they aren't already. Search the table and read the report at riaclu.org/openMeetingsReport.

Check how accessible your city or town council and school committee policies are.

City/Town/School District	Watch Livestream	Video Archived	Packet Online	Remote Participation	Notes
Barrington Town Council	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	
Bristol Town Council	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	
Burrillville Town Council	No	Yes	Yes*	No	* Packets are only available online for the three most recent meetings.
Central Falls City Council	No	Yes*	No	No	* Only some of the council meetings are audio or video recorded for later review.
Charlestown Town Council	Yes	Yes	Yes	No*	* Agenda notes that no comments from the public will be accepted virtually during the meeting, but the Town of Charlestown website inaccurately suggests that the public can participate virtually.

SUMMER LETTERS & TESTIMONY

SCHOOL RESOURCE OFFICER The ACLU, joined by a dozen other organizations, sent a letter successfully urging the **Barrington** Town Council to reject a proposal to add a second school resource officer (SRO) in the school district. In September, the Town Council unanimously voted against approving the SRO, although they indicated that the issue could come back in the future.

POLITICAL SIGN ORDINANCES In response to a complaint from a political candidate, we sent a letter to **Westerly** officials demanding non-enforcement of the Town's "clearly unconstitutional" zoning ordinance allowing homeowners to post no more than one political sign on their property and dictating they can be posted no more than 60 days before an election. The town quickly backed down and agreed to cease enforcement of, and revise, the ordinance.

YOUTH CAMP MEDICAL OVERREACH We submitted testimony to the **RI Department of Human Services (DHS)** opposing a proposed policy governing youth camps that would require campers to get written permission from both a parent and a medical professional in order to take any over-the-counter medication while at camp — even Tums or ibuprofen. We urged the DHS to revise this unnecessary and intrusive proposed policy, and are awaiting a response.

SLAPP SUIT BACKDOWN When a local law firm threatened to sue a former client for defamation for a negative review she posted on social media, we advised the firm we were prepared to contest any such action as an unlawful SLAPP suit and seek damages on the complainant's behalf. The lawyers quickly backed down.

DEVELOPMENT CORNER

As summer winds down and we head into a busy fall, I want to start with a thank-you to the Rhode Island Folk Festival for inviting us to join them again this year. It was a beautiful day to be outside, to hear some incredible music from local musicians, and — most importantly for us — to connect with people from across the state.

At our table, we shared voting rights materials, talked about our candidate survey, and answered questions about civil liberties and the work of the ACLU of RI. Events like this give us an opportunity to have conversations we might not otherwise have to hear directly from Rhode Islanders about the issues that matter to them. Thank you to everyone who stopped by to talk with us!

All of these conversations at festivals, on college campuses, and throughout our communities are a critical part of how we spread our message. Our biggest gathering of the fall is just around the corner! Our Annual Meeting will be held on **Thursday, November 12, 2026, at The Guild in Pawtucket**. This year, as the country marks 250 years since its foundation and the ACLU of RI marks 67 years of protecting civil liberties in our state, our theme is ***Then. Now. Our Work Continues.***

Across generations, the circumstances have changed, but many of the struggles over freedom, equality, and government power have endured. Our Annual Meeting gives us an opportunity to look back at where we've been, recognize how those struggles continue to shape the present, celebrate the people who make this work possible, and look toward the work ahead. This year we will present the *Raymond J. Pettine Civil Libertarian of the Year Award* to longtime friend, supporter, and cooperating attorney **Lise Iwon**. We'll also feature a photography exhibit by James Hazelwood, along with food, conversations, and time together.

I hope to see you somewhere along the way this fall, whether you stop by one of our tables in October or join us at The Guild in November. As always, thank you for staying connected and for helping make our work possible.

– Monica Smith, Development Coordinator



Monica speaking at the RI Folk Festival

Come Find Us This Fall!

We'll be out in the community throughout October, and we'd love to see you. Stop by our table, pick up some information, ask a question, or simply say hello:

- **October 1, 11am-1pm**
CCRI Warwick Student Resource Fair
- **October 17, 11am-4pm**
New England Witches Guild at Crescent Park in East Providence.
- **October 29, 11am-1pm**
CCRI Lincoln Field House Student Resource Fair



Scan to get tickets!
This QR code will take you to a third-party website, ticketleap.com

You're invited!

2026 Annual Meeting

Thursday, November 12, 2026, 6pm-8:30pm
The Guild in Pawtucket, 461 Main St., Pawtucket
Tickets: \$25 | Sponsorship opportunities available!

For tickets, sponsorships, and program ad opportunities, go to riaclu.org/AnnualMeeting2026!

Businesses, organizations, unions, community partners, and individuals can also support our Annual Meeting through event sponsorship and program ads! Email msmith@riaclu.org or call our office at 401-831-7171.



RECAPPING RECOGNITIONS & EVENTS

Photos top to bottom on the right side: We joined a series of events and festivities this summer. We were thrilled to be a part of Governor McKee's signing of the "364-Day Bill" which will protect immigrants convicted of minor offenses from automatic deportation by closing a loophole between state and federal law.

Then, during Progreso Latino's annual potluck, the ACLU of RI was honored alongside other members of the Immigrant Coalition and the sponsors of the "364-Day bill" for our work on that legislation.

We held our annual Legislative Wrap-Up in July in Cumberland. Madalyn McGunagle, ACLU of RI policy associate, spoke on a panel alongside guest legislators, Rep. Cherie Cruz and Rep. Jennifer Stewart, to discuss the legislative session. The event included information about wins and losses for civil liberties, and the bills we expect to be back next year.

We tabled at the United Way gubernatorial candidate forum before the primary election. Monica Smith, ACLU of RI development coordinator, handed out many "Know Your Rights" materials and our Legislative Voting Record (and lots of swag!) Catch us tabling at more events listed on p. 6!

Photo below: Our amazing Board members and volunteers handed out students' rights information in locations across the state during the annual event hosted by Back to School Rhode Island, where students and their families can pick up backpacks and school supplies.

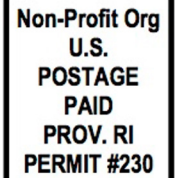


ELECTION: ACLU OF RI BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Are you interested in being considered for the ACLU of RI's Board of Directors? If so, let us know and we will provide you information about the process and Board Member duties and responsibilities. We especially welcome a diverse pool from our membership. You can let us know of your interest by emailing us at info@riaclu.org.



ACLU FOUNDATION of RHODE ISLAND
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RETURN SERVICE REQUESTED

Help us continue our work of protecting and defending civil liberties across Rhode Island.
Attend our Annual Meeting on Thursday, November 12.

FOR TICKETS, SPONSORSHIPS, ADS

Go to riaclu.org/AnnualMeeting2026 to learn more on our website.

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Can't make it? Consider making a special tax-deductible gift:

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or

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Mail a check made out to
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Scan the QR code with your
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