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ACLU OF RI POSITION: SUPPORT

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF 24-H 7070, RELATING TO RESIDENCE OF INDIVIDUALS IN GOVERNMENT CUSTODY February 6, 2024

We commend the General Assembly for the action it took in its decennial redistricting two years ago in taking a first step to addressing the long-standing problem of prison gerrymandering. That first step – reallocating to their home communities prisoners who were serving a sentence of two years or less on census day – means that approximately 41% of the ACI population was reallocated to their home district. We urge this committee to take the next step and join the other states that reallocate their *entire* prison population to the extent their home addresses are known.

We realize this next step could not yield results until the 2030 reapportionment is done, but we urge passage of the legislation *this year* so that the issue need not take up the Committee’s time again, and the problem is resolved once and for all. We note that Illinois took that step, approving a prison gerrymandering ban that takes effect for the 2030 census.

Twelve other states have addressed prison gerrymandering by reassigning those who were counted at correctional institutions, but only one, Pennsylvania, differentiates by the length of sentence, and in that case the state reassigns everyone serving a term of less than 10 years, not two. Rhode Island should fully join all the other states that have universally addressed this problem.

There are also a number of equity reasons for the General Assembly to take this next step for future reapportionments. First, the individuals at the ACI are not treated as Cranston residents by the City for any other meaningful purpose. Among other things, ACI detainees and prisoners, whatever the length of their sentence, do not get to participate in Cranston’s civic life in any way; they are denied the right to send their children to Cranston schools based on their ACI address,¹ something that should be allowed if they truly were city residents; and Cranston’s elected officials do not campaign or endeavor to represent their purported ACI “constituents.”² Instead, just as state election law specifies that people do not lose their residence for voting purposes by being incarcerated, redistricting should recognize and reject the under-representation of those communities – generally poorer ones – that results from prison gerrymandering.

¹ “Rhode Island Mayor: Prisoners count as residents when it helps me, not when it helps them,” by Sarah Mayeux, March 31, 2010. <https://www.prisonersofthecensus.org/news/2010/03/31/rimayo/>

² *Davidson v. City of Cranston*, 188 F.Supp.3d 146, 147-148 (D.R.I. 2016), reversed on other grounds, 837 F.3d 135 (1st Cir. 2016).

It is also crucial to remember that efforts to address prison gerrymandering seek to counter two evils: the under-representation of communities from where people at the ACI have come, and the *over-representation* of the communities where prisons are located. By continuing to count hundreds of incarcerated individuals as residents of the ACI, the Cranston districts encompassing the prison facilities will continue to have inappropriately greater electoral power than all other districts in the state, as they will be representing a much smaller base of residents.

Finally, in the past, some have expressed opposition to this bill in the erroneous belief that it might somehow affect Cranston's funding from the government. The action taken by the General Assembly in passing the redistricting legislation this past census is testament to the fact this is simply not the case.

For all these reasons, we urge this committee to take the step of abolishing ACI prison gerrymandering for future reapportionments so that this debate does not need to continue for the next eight years!

We thank you in advance for considering our comments.