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ACLU OF RI POSITION: SUPPORT

TESTIMONY ON 22-S 2509, RELATING TO MUNICIPAL DETENTION FACILITY CORPORATIONS April 26, 2022

This bill would prohibit the establishment of new privately owned detention facilities in Rhode Island and eliminate the state law authorizing municipal detention facility corporations such as the one that created the Wyatt Detention Center. This legislation would, among other things, address the very important issue raised by Wyatt's incarceration of civil immigrant detainees under a contract that the facility entered into with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) in 2019.

When Wyatt reentered into that contract with ICE, the ACLU was extremely critical of it, and for good reason. The facility's history of cooperation with ICE was punctuated by a lawsuit the ACLU filed in 2008 and successfully settled after a civil detainee died in Wyatt's custody following months of abuse and lack of medical care. As a result of that lawsuit, ICE cancelled its contract with Wyatt to hold immigrant detainees. It was therefore very distressing in 2019 to witness Wyatt once again take on this role, especially at a time when the agreement served to assist the federal government's blatant mistreatment of people fleeing danger and seeking asylum in our country.

Leaving Wyatt to the side, it is worth emphasizing that across the country, private prisons are notorious for their cost-cutting measures that cause immeasurable harm to the persons who are detained there. A Department of Justice report has highlighted some of the many problems associated with private prisons.¹ Thus, this bill accomplishes something important beyond Wyatt by establishing a critical and clear state policy against private prisons generally.

Because this bill applies prospectively only and would allow Wyatt to continue until its contracts come up for renewal, its passage does not raise the same concerns – and litigation – that previous attempts to close Wyatt created.

For all these reasons, the ACLU supports this legislation.

¹ "Review of the Federal Bureau of Prisons' Monitoring of Contract Prisons," Office of the Inspector General, US DOJ, August 2016. <https://oig.justice.gov/reports/2016/e1606.pdf>