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VIA EMAIL

The Hon. Dominick Ruggerio, Senate President
The Hon. Nicholas Mattiello, Speaker of the House
State House
Providence, RI 02903

Dear President Ruggerio and Speaker Mattiello:

As the Rhode Island legislature prepares to reconvene and navigate the complexities of operating a legislature in the midst of a global pandemic, it is critical that public safety be balanced as best as possible with the administration of open and transparent governmental processes. While both of your Houses consider how they can most feasibly reconvene as a body that ensures participation by all elected legislators and public monitoring of those activities, we wish to address the specific issue of public participation in the committee process while the State House is closed.

In the past two weeks, there have been a few committee hearings for the first time in over two months. All hearings were closed to the public, although people did have the opportunity to submit written testimony via email. Going forward, we urge the House and Senate to adopt procedures that will also allow members of the public to testify remotely.

Legislative hearings operate as a critical forum for advocates and community members to share perspectives and positions on important pieces of policy, and the legislature must develop and maintain processes that support more direct continued public involvement. Written testimony cannot by itself substitute for the give and take that occurs when those testifying are able (whether in person or virtually) to respond to questions from committee members and address concerns raised by legislators during the committee meeting. Just as government witnesses have testified remotely at the recent committee hearings, we believe the committee hearing process should similarly allow public testimony in this manner.

In the constrained circumstances under which committees are operating, we also believe it is important that all written testimony and commentary be verbally entered into the record during each committee hearing. We note with approval the actions of Chair McNamara in doing this at the start of the House HEW committee's recent meeting.

Both of these procedures, we believe, are critical to ensure that the hindering of meaningful public participation in the legislative process does not become an unintended side-effect of the COVID-19 crisis. We hope you will give your prompt consideration to this important topic and that you will feel free to reach out with any questions you have. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Steven Brown
Executive Director

Hannah Stern
Policy Associate

cc: The Hon. Joseph Shekarchi
The Hon. Michael McCaffrey
The Hon. Dennis Algieri
The Hon. Blake Filippi