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**TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF 19-H 5863.
THE FAIR CHANCE LICENSING BILL
April 23, 2019**

The ACLU of RI strongly supports this bill, which attempts to address the very significant problem associated with the harsh impact of criminal-record related professional licensing restrictions.

Rhode Island makes it extremely difficult for people with criminal records to obtain occupational licenses. Dozens of licensed occupations in our state have some form of conviction-related barrier codified by legislation, and every year legislation gets introduced to include more barriers to licensing based on a person's past criminal record – no matter how old or irrelevant that record may be.

These current licensing laws and regulations impact many Rhode Islanders. Not only does the State have more than 23,000 people currently under probation or parole supervision, more than 70,000 Rhode Islanders are estimated to have a past felony record. This is to say nothing of people with misdemeanor records or with felony arrests not followed by convictions.

Discrimination against people with criminal records is also an issue of equity that should be of the utmost importance to Rhode Islanders. As in other states, justice-involved Rhode Islanders are disproportionately low-income and people of color, whose access to meaningful employment is hindered not only by base hiring discrimination but by these barriers to licensing. This is of particular significance because over 70% of jobs classified by the Department of Labor as lower income require a license. Thus, restrictive licensing requirements focused on past criminal history shut people out from large swaths of employment that would otherwise be readily available to those exiting the criminal legal system and who are in need of gainful and meaningful employment. Barring justice-involved individuals from licensed occupations only exacerbates racial wage and wealth gaps, and makes rehabilitation and reintegration harder, not easier.

By establishing relevant standards for considering a person's past criminal record and ensuring that the record is job related before considering whether it should disqualify a person from being gainfully employed, this bill will give a fair chance to all Rhode Islanders who meet fair and relevant qualifications to get a license. We therefore urge passage of this bill.