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**TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF 18-H 7204,
RELATING TO VETERANS' BENEFITS
May 15, 2018**

The ACLU of RI strongly supports this legislation, which would permit the recipients of “less than honorable” military discharges to qualify for state veterans' benefits when the discharge was based on the veteran's sexual orientation. For decades, excellent military personnel - including those honored for their valor - were drummed out of the military once their sexual orientation became known. The idea that in 2018 they might be ineligible for benefits for the service they provided to their country is unconscionable. We therefore appreciate and applaud the sponsor's effort to right this terrible wrong.

The bill also requires personnel dealing with these benefit requests to respond in a way that will “ensure the dignity and privacy of the veteran.” To better protect their privacy, we would urge the inclusion of language that would disallow the maintenance by the state and municipal agency of records with this specific information.

Finally, we would also strongly urge the committee and sponsor to consider amending this bill to address an identical wrong in another statute. Three years ago, the state's fair housing law was amended to bar discrimination against veterans in housing, a real problem that had been brought to the attention of the state Commission for Human Rights, but for which there was no remedy at the time. Unfortunately, the anti-discrimination provision that was added in 2015 applies only to veterans “with an honorable discharge or an honorable or general administrative discharge.” R.I.G.L. §34-37-4(a). It thus fails to protect veterans who were discharged because of their sexual orientation for the same reasons that this bill seeks to overcome. The ACLU therefore urges the committee to consider adding language to address the issue of fair housing for these unfairly slighted and discriminated-against veterans as well.

Thank you for considering our views. We once again commend the sponsor for introducing this important legislation.