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## ACLU OF RI POSITION: OPPOSE

### TESTIMONY ON 22-H 7817, ACTS RELATING TO OPEN MEETINGS March 8, 2022

This bill would allow the URI Board of Trustees to permanently hold all of its meetings completely remotely. The ACLU of Rhode Island opposes this legislation.

As was true during most of the two years of the pandemic, public bodies were able to meet fully remotely, and the ACLU supported that interim measure – with protections in place for public participation. Last year, we also did not oppose passage of a special open meetings exemption that permanently allows some URI Board members to participate remotely *as long as a majority of the Board members meet in person*. This compromise was enacted in recognition of the fact that the URI Board includes some individuals who live out of state, making full in-person attendance for everybody difficult. However, taking the additional step of eliminating the in-person quorum requirement entirely, as this bill does, sets a troubling precedent. We do not believe there is a compelling reason to single out one particular public body to meet completely via computer screen in perpetuity without ever having to directly face members of the public – including, in this case, alumni – when it meets to discuss and decide matters of public interest.

And let there be no mistake, the URI Board does discuss important matters of public interest, including most recently, whether to revoke honorary degrees given to former public officials. Accountability and transparency are enhanced when public bodies meet in person, and members of the public and the media are able follow up on matters that get discussed – things that cannot happen when meetings are held remotely and members of the public bodies are insulated from direct contact with the public.

In addition, this bill fails to include safeguards that the ACLU and other open government organizations pressed for during the pandemic-allowed remote meetings. Among other things, we argued it was important that members of the public bodies be required to keep their cameras on during the meetings and that any documents being discussed be provided on-line in advance. By both shutting out the public altogether from face-to-face meetings and imposing no statutory safeguards on the conduct of remote meetings, this bill significantly weakens the goals of the Open Meetings Act and establishes an unfortunate precedent that other bodies are sure to ask for as well.

For all these reasons, we urge rejection of this legislation. Thank you for your consideration of our views.