

January 31, 2017

TO: RI House Judiciary Committee
FROM: RI Center for Freedom & Prosperity, Mike Stenhouse
SUBJECT: Justice Reinvestment Initiative (JRI) and Right On Crime legislation

Chairman Keable and committee members. As CEO for the RI Center for Freedom & Prosperity, a non-partisan research and advocacy organization, I would like to bring your attention to the policy brief *Right on Crime* that our Center published just yesterday (RIFreedom.org), as part of our new family-focused public policy initiative.

New national research shows that Rhode Island ranked just 48th on the **2016 Family Prosperity Index (FPI)**. In December 2016, the RI Center for Freedom & Prosperity, in conjunction with its national partner, the American Conservative Union, issued a 52-page *RI Family Prosperity* report that highlighted contributing factors to our state's poor rankings across 57 indexes. Among other discussions, the report suggests that Rhode Island has room to modernize and improve its criminal justice system. Reforms put forth as part of the state's *Justice Reinvestment Initiative (JRI)* and by other organizations can help provide more opportunity for upward mobility and prosperity for Ocean State Families, thus helping our overall national ranking and improving family well-being.

With regard to House bills 5063, 5064, 5065, 5115, and 5117, there are a few brief points I'd like to make. As a tax-exempt nonprofit organization, our Center cannot specifically advise you to support or oppose these bills, but we are allowed to discuss our research and perspectives with regard to their underlying premise.

First, our Center believes that the JRI bills before you today are not about letting violent, career criminals off the hook; rather, this is about reining in over-zealous incarceration and probation policies by protecting some individuals and ex-offenders from the potential destruction of their future capacity to lead a productive life for themselves and their families.

More importantly, please be aware that these bills are consistent with a national criminal justice reform movement that is supported by advocates from both left and the right: on the right, we call the movement - "Right On Crime". The issues addressed in these bills are not typical Democrat-vs-Republican or right-vs-left issues; they are issues that cut across traditional party and philosophical lines by making family considerations of paramount concern.

Dozens of red and blue states have adopted related provisions; Alaska, Arkansas, Delaware, Hawaii, Illinois, Kansas, Missouri, North Dakota, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Texas, and Utah. These type of provisions are supported by conservatives such as Attorneys General Ed Meese and Asa Hutchinson, and by prominent libertarians, such as Harvey Silverglate, as well as by the ACLU.

While each bill deserves its own scrutiny, in general as a package, they seek to lessen the harmful consequences of over-incarceration for Ocean State families. Our state of Rhode Island would benefit in the following ways:

- Address the disproportionate incarceration of minorities
- Help disentangle many individuals needlessly embroiled in the state's criminal justice system
- Give more hope to children of incarcerated parents that they might break the cycle of poverty
- Relieve pressure on Rhode Island's over-burdened probation system

Specifically, with regard to **H5115**, we are concerned about the enhanced sentencing standards when firearms are involved; this goes against the spirit of the JRI as it would arbitrarily allow a more severe penalty because one category of (legal) weapon becomes a prioritized consideration over the actual harm inflicted.

If I can be of service, please contact me at mstenhouse@RIFreedom.org or 401.429.6115.