



April 4, 2025

The Honorable Robert Craven
Chairman, House Judiciary Committee
Rhode Island House of Representatives
82 Smith Street
Providence, RI 02903

RE: Support for H5124 – The Rhode Island First Step Act

Dear Chairman Craven and Members of the Committee:

On behalf of The Sentencing Project, I write to express our strong support for H5124, the *Rhode Island First Step Act*. This legislation represents a critical advancement in ensuring fairness, dignity, and rehabilitation within the state's criminal justice system.

H5124 introduces thoughtful and evidence-based reforms that create opportunities for meaningful sentence reductions, especially for elderly and terminally ill individuals, who pose minimal risk to public safety. By allowing for modifications to sentences and creating pathways to pre-release custody, Rhode Island acknowledges both the human dignity of incarcerated individuals and the fiscal prudence of prioritizing rehabilitation over prolonged incarceration.

Sentence reduction opportunities, like those proposed in H5124, provide older individuals serving life sentences a second chance. Nationally, more than a third (35%) of the life-sentenced prison population in 2024 were people aged 55 and older.¹ Further, there has been a 13% increase since 2020 in people 55 and older serving life.² Of the 238 individuals serving a life sentence in Rhode Island, 80 of them are 55 years or older.³ H5124 provides a lifeline for elderly individuals incarcerated in Rhode Island.

H5124 provides people who are serving life-sentences that are rehabilitated and at minimal risk of recidivism the opportunity for sentence modification. Reoffending by persons who have been released from long-term or life sentences is rare, as numerous studies have found that individuals released after serving life sentences reoffend at significantly low rates.⁴ Further,

¹ Ashely Nellis & Celeste Barry, *A Matter of Life: The Scope and Impact of Life and Long Term Imprisonment in the United States* (The Sentencing Project, 2025) 17, <https://www.sentencingproject.org/app/uploads/2025/01/A-Matter-of-Life-The-Scope-and-Impact-of-Life-and-Long-Term-Imprisonment-in-the-United-States.pdf>.

² *Id.*

³ *Id.* at 18.

⁴ *Id.* at 5; Baay, P. E., Liem, M., & Nieuwbeerta, P. (2012). "Eximprisoned homicide offenders: Once bitten, twice shy?" The effect of the length of imprisonment on recidivism for homicide offenders. *Homicide Studies*, 16(3), 259-279. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1088767912450012>; Rhodes, W., Gaes, G., Luallen, J., Kling, R., Rich, T., & Shively, M. (2014). Following

recidivism rates drop significantly as individuals age. H5124 provides individuals serving life sentences, who are not at risk to reoffend, access to crucial opportunities for sentence reductions.

This legislation also appropriately focuses on public safety and reentry, requiring individualized determinations and incorporating risk and needs assessments. H5124 mandates access to educational programming, vocational training, medical care, and reentry support, all of which are essential to reducing recidivism and promoting successful reintegration into the community.

Further, the bill incorporates gender-responsive practices, such as banning the shackling of pregnant individuals and providing menstrual hygiene products, aligning Rhode Island with modern correctional standards.

We commend Representatives Lombardi, Hull, Ajello, Potter, Stewart, and Felix for their leadership on this issue. The Sentencing Project urges the House Judiciary Committee to advance H5124 without delay and recommends its swift passage by the General Assembly.

Rhode Island has the opportunity to be a national leader in creating a more equitable, humane, and effective justice system. The Rhode Island First Step Act is a commendable move in that direction.

Thank you for your consideration of this important measure.

Sincerely,



Nicole D. Porter
Senior Director of Advocacy
The Sentencing Project

incarceration, most released offenders never return to prison. *Crime & Delinquency*, 62(8), 1003–1025. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011128714549655>; Roberts, A. R., Zgoba, K. M., & Shahidullah, S. M. (2007). Recidivism among four types of homicide offenders: An exploratory analysis of 336 homicide offenders in New Jersey. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 12(5), 493–507. DOI:10.1016/j.avb.2007.02.012; Shihadeh, E. S., Nordyke, K., & Reed, A. (2014). Recidivism in the state of Louisiana: An analysis of 3- and 5-year recidivism rates among long-serving inmates. Louisiana State University; Liem, M. (2013). Homicide offenders recidivism: A review of the literature. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 18(1), 19–25. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2012.08.001>; Langan, P.A., & Levin, D.J. (1994). Recidivism of prisoners released in 1994. Bureau of Justice Statistics; Laub, J. H. & Sampson, R. J. (2006). *Shared beginnings, divergent lives: Delinquent boys to age 70*. Harvard University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1q3z28f>.