



The RI **FREEDOM** Collective

Rhode Island's Right to Vote Campaign

*The 2006 Victory
and the Work Still Unfinished*

May 2026

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VOICES OF THE MOVEMENT

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- **Marlon "Inphynit DaGhost" Carey** / Hip-Hop Artist, Educator, and Community Organizer / Released from incarceration in 2004 and became a prominent figure in the 2006 campaign to restore voting rights
- **Representative Edith Ajello** / Rhode Island House of Representatives — District 1, Providence / Long-serving legislator with significant influence on judiciary and civil rights policy
- **James Jeter** / National Advocate for Justice Reform and civic inclusion / Co-Founder, Full Citizens Coalition / Previously Incarcerated
- **Steven Brown** / Executive Director, ACLU of Rhode Island / Over 30 years as a leader who uses litigation and policy research to shape civil liberties outcomes in Rhode Island / Active in 2006 campaign
- **John Marion** / Executive Director, Common Cause Rhode Island / Longtime leader focused on ethics, elections and transparency.

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"To truly advocate for a beautifully just world that does not yet exist is to commit an act of radical imagination. Justice is only within our grasp when ushered in from a distant horizon of possibility — through study and imagination and effort."

— CORNELL WILLIAM BROOKS

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— Joshua Eneji, Stacey Hadash, Virginia McDowell



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Executive Summary

In November 2006, Rhode Island voters approved a constitutional amendment restoring the right to vote to people with felony convictions upon their release from incarceration — making Rhode Island the first state in the nation to achieve this reform through a public referendum. The campaign succeeded on a tight budget, concentrating its resources in six urban communities and deploying formerly incarcerated canvassers alongside Brown University and Rhode Island College student volunteers.

Twenty years later, the Rhode Island Freedom Collective — an organization founded and led by formerly incarcerated juvenile lifers — partnered with researchers from the Harvard Kennedy School to ask whether the law has reached the people it was written for. The findings are stark.

KEY INSIGHTS

- *A right unknown is a right unrealized.* In RIFC's March 2026 discussion groups at Amos House, 71% of formerly incarcerated participants did not know the 2006 law existed; many had spent years telling other formerly incarcerated people they could not vote.
- *Discharge planning fails almost everyone.* Half of discussion group participants reported receiving no transition or reentry services before release because participation is voluntary rather than mandatory, and 63% of participants received no voting rights information at all.
- *Turnout among rights-restored voters is far below the general population.* Of the roughly 5,200 Rhode Islanders eligible to vote in 2024 because of felony rights restoration, just 25% cast a ballot — less than half the statewide rate of 63%. Among those in their first year out, turnout was 11%.
- *The legal architecture is sound; the delivery is not.* The 2006 Act and its 2007 regulations designate the Rhode Island Department of Corrections (RIDOC) as a voter-registration agency and create a monthly data pipeline to the Secretary of State. On paper the system is comprehensive; in practice the conversation that gives the paperwork meaning does not consistently happen.
- *Peer-led outreach is what moves the needle.* Justice-impacted people are far more likely to register and vote when contacted directly by trusted peers than by state agencies.

The report concludes with recommendations that can be implemented without new legislation: mandatory transition planning meetings; voter-registration education delivered as

a conversation rather than a checkbox; formal integration of community partners — particularly RIFC — into the discharge process; hyper-local outreach in the neighborhoods where justice-impacted people actually live; and engagement of the Secretary of State to deliver civic education inside facilities and through existing community hubs throughout the state.

Most existing accounts of voting rights reform in Rhode Island have sidelined the formerly incarcerated people who built it. This report is produced by the Rhode Island Freedom Collective — an organization founded and led by people with direct experience of the justice system — and it centers the voices of those most directly impacted. By lifting up the lived experiences behind these reforms, it bridges legislative and political innovation with the people whose work made that change possible, reframing this history not simply as a policy victory but as a movement shaped from the ground up.

SECTION I

The Problem: A Vote Denied Long After Prison

In Rhode Island, losing the right to vote was not simply a consequence of serving time in prison; it was a consequence of ever having been convicted of a felony. Under Article II, Section 1 of the state constitution, no Rhode Islander with a felony conviction could cast a ballot until every day of the sentence had been served, including the long tail of probation and parole. In a state with some of the longest community-supervision terms in the country, that restriction reached far beyond prison walls. Thousands of Rhode Islanders — working, paying taxes, raising children in their communities — were barred from voting for years, and many for life. This case study tells the story of how a grassroots campaign amended the constitution in 2006 to restore voting rights at the prison door, and why, twenty years later, the promise of that reform remains unfulfilled.

It was a measurable erasure of political power from communities that were already among the most marginalized in the state.

Rhode Island's modern felony disenfranchisement regime took its current form in 1986, when voters ratified a new state constitution produced by that year's constitutional convention. Article II, Section 1 of the new charter — the "Right to Vote" provision — extended the franchise to every citizen of voting age but carved out a sweeping exception for anyone convicted of a felony. The operative language was unambiguous: "No felon shall be permitted to vote until completion of such felon's sentence, served or suspended, and of parole or probation regardless of a nolo contendere plea. Upon such completion, such person's right to vote shall be restored."¹

Because disenfranchisement was locked into the Constitution, change would require another vote of the people. And because Rhode Island imposed unusually long probation and parole tails — supervision often measured in decades — the phrase "until completion" did most of the work. Thousands of Rhode Islanders who had served their prison time and returned to their communities remained legally barred from voting, often for years after release and, for many, for the rest of their lives.

By the mid-2000s, more than 15,500 Rhode Islanders were barred from voting due to a felony conviction, and 86% of them — more than 13,000 people — were not in prison at all².

They were living in their communities, working, paying taxes, and raising families, but denied any voice in the government that regulated their lives. Rhode Island had the second-highest rate of people on probation in the nation, which meant the disenfranchisement law reached unusually deep into neighborhoods, families, and civic life.

The racial dimension was acute. As the Rhode Island Family Life Center documented in its 2004 study *Political Punishment*, the rate of disenfranchisement among African American voters was more than six times the statewide rate. One in five Black men statewide were disenfranchised. In Providence, that figure rose to one in four. Hispanic Rhode Islanders lost the vote at more than 2.5 times the statewide average, with one in eleven Hispanic men barred from voting. Because these communities were concentrated in the state's cities, the urban vote was suppressed at 3.5 times the rate in the rest of the state. This was not an abstraction. It was a measurable erasure of political power from communities that were already among the most marginalized in the state.²

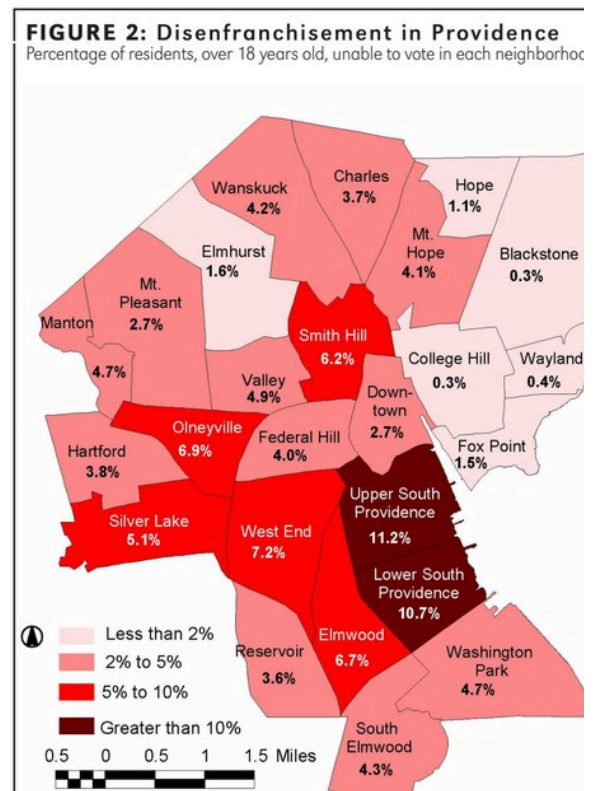
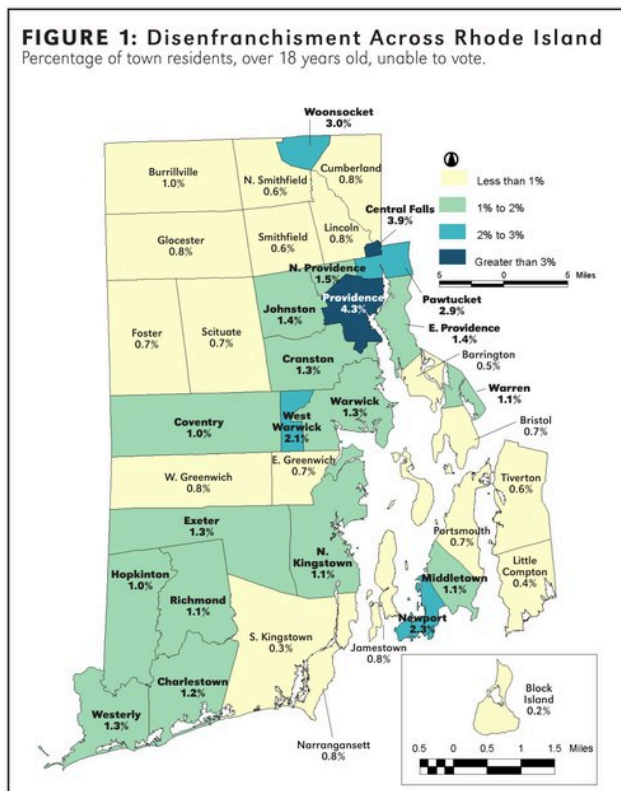


FIGURE 1 Felony Disenfranchisement in Rhode Island and Within Providence, 2004

Source: *Special Report on the Impact of Incarceration and Reentry from the Rhode Island Family Life Center 2004*, by Nina Keough and Marshall Clement.

The Constitutional Lock and the Path to the Ballot

Because disenfranchisement was written into the Constitution, the legislature could not simply pass a bill to change it. Any restoration of voting rights required amending the

state's founding document — which, under Rhode Island law, meant a direct vote of the people.

In 2005, at the opening of the legislative session, the Brennan Center for Justice at NYU Law School drafted a joint resolution to amend Article II, Section 1 of the Constitution, proposing to re-enfranchise people immediately upon their discharge from incarceration rather than upon completion of their full sentence. At the time, the Brennan Center had been working with state coalitions across the country on felony disenfranchisement reform; Rhode Island would become the first state to enact its model legislation. The legislature passed this resolution on June 28, 2005, placing the amendment on the November 2006 ballot as Question 2. Criminal justice reform was, as organizer Ariel Werner later observed, "radioactive to elected officials." But legislators were willing to put the measure on the ballot and let the people of Rhode Island decide.³

The Brennan Center then drafted the comprehensive companion legislation — House Bill 7938, introduced on March 28, 2006, by Representatives Almeida, Williams, Ajello, Diaz, and Slater — that would implement the amendment if voters approved it. The bill's findings were blunt: Rhode Island was "the only state in New England that denies the vote to people convicted of felonies, not only while they are in prison, but also while they are living in the community." It laid out the mechanics of restoration: voting rights would be automatically restored the moment a person was discharged from incarceration. No application. No waiting period. No parole board review. The bill also designated the Department of Corrections as a voter registration agency, required courts to notify defendants that conviction would result in loss of the right to vote only during incarceration, and charged the Secretary of State with developing a public education program about the new law.²

The legislature passed HB 7938 during the 2006 session, contingent on voter ratification of the constitutional amendment. The law would take effect the moment Question 2 passed. The stage was set: the legislature had done what it could. The rest was up to the voters of Rhode Island — and the campaign that would try to reach them.^{2, 4}

SECTION II

The Campaign: Flying Under the Radar

The Rhode Island Right to Vote Campaign was formally led by the Rhode Island Family Life Center (now OpenDoors), but its character was defined by an unusual coalition and an unconventional strategy. The work moved through three overlapping stages: research that documented the scale of disenfranchisement in Rhode Island, a legislative effort to place the constitutional question on the November ballot, and a public-facing campaign to secure voter approval. Throughout all three, formerly incarcerated organizers, students from Brown University and Rhode Island College (RIC), and Family Life Center staff worked side by side.⁵

The entire ground game — every canvass shift, every door knock, every dollar — was concentrated in these six cities.

The campaign's media strategy was deliberate, not absent. With the casino referendum and other statewide races saturating television, Field Director Dan Schleifer concentrated the campaign on lower-cost formats — radio spots, print ads, signage on city buses, and a handful of billboards — placed within the urban communities where the campaign intended to win. Outside those communities, Schleifer kept the effort quiet to avoid activating opposition.⁶

The reasoning was simple and ruthless arithmetic. Rhode Island's suburban and rural communities — 33 of the state's 39 cities and towns — were less likely to support restoring voting rights to people with felony convictions. The campaign could not win by persuading the whole state. It could only win by selectively turning out voters in the places where concentrated residents allowed for conversation and persuasion.

The campaign identified six urban targets: Providence, Central Falls, Woonsocket, Newport, East Providence, and Pawtucket. These were communities with higher concentrations of people directly affected by incarceration, higher proportions of Black and Latino residents, and more receptive attitudes toward second chances. The entire ground game — every canvass shift, every door knock, every dollar — was concentrated in these six cities.

The ground game was carried out by a hybrid corps. The campaign hired Bruce Reilly, who served time in the ACI alongside others who had helped lead the campaign, as its volunteer recruiter. Working with Brown sophomore Ariel Werner, Reilly drove what Schleifer would describe in *The Nation* as "the largest mobilization of Brown and RIC students I have seen in my seven years as a Providence resident." Most of the paid canvassers were either themselves disenfranchised or had family members who were. On busy evenings, Schleifer wrote, student volunteers "effectively tripled the size of our team of paid canvassers."

The campaign was made possible, in part, by a federal court ruling that had cleared the legal ground months earlier. In 2004, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) of Rhode Island had filed a First Amendment challenge to state campaign-finance laws that prevented coalitions from doing what Question 2 would require: a ban on nonprofit corporate contributions to ballot-question advocacy, contribution caps on ballot-measure campaigns, and a prohibition on organizations coordinating their efforts. In April 2006 — months before the November vote — U.S. District Judge Ernest Torres ruled largely in the ACLU's favor, striking down those barriers. The decision allowed the broad civic, religious, labor, and civil-rights coalition behind Question 2 to pool resources and coordinate across organizational lines. ACLU of Rhode Island Executive Director Steven Brown — a named plaintiff in the case in his individual capacity — has described that ruling as the legal infrastructure that made the campaign financially viable.

SECTION III

The Ground Game: Directly Impacted Voices as the Weapon

The strategy mapped above explains what the campaign chose to do; the ground game is the story of who carried it out, and why those people were uniquely positioned to be persuasive at the door.

The campaign operated on a total budget of \$347,464 — all of it raised through a single entity, the Family Life Advocacy Center⁷. No organized opposition spending was recorded against Question 2. Without money for television or radio, the campaign had to rely on what it could afford: people.

What made the ground game distinctive was not just its intensity but *who was running it*. The campaign made a deliberate decision to hire and center formerly incarcerated people as canvassers, organizers, and public spokespeople. This was not a symbolic gesture. It was the strategic core of the operation, and it reflected a philosophy that Bruce Reilly, the campaign's Volunteer and Get Out the Vote Coordinator, would later articulate: twenty years ago, there was no culture of directly impacted people leading their own movements. Traditional advocacy was led by elite institutions speaking on behalf of affected communities. Reilly, who was on parole and attending Rhode Island College full-time while running the GOTV operation, worked to change that by insisting that the people closest to the issue be the ones making the case.

The messengers mattered as much as the message — and the campaign's power came from combining two kinds of credibility. Formerly incarcerated canvassers knocked on doors as neighbors who had done time, who understood the stigma of a record, and who could look a skeptical voter in the eye and say: *I am the person this law is about*. They were joined by a massive mobilization of Brown University and Rhode Island College students — approximately 150 in the final weekend alone — who brought energy, numbers, and the institutional weight of an Ivy League university volunteering alongside people with felony convictions. It was this combination of lived experience and student volunteerism that gave the ground game its distinctive force. The campaign distilled its argument into a single, disarming question for undecided voters: *"Would you rather encourage people to do the*

Would you rather encourage people to do the right thing, or would you rather prevent them from doing the right thing.

SECTION IV

The Faces of the Campaign

Three individuals illustrate the distinctive character of the Right to Vote Campaign's leadership — and the personal risk that advocacy demanded from people still navigating re-entry.

Bruce Reilly was hired by the Family Life Center as the campaign's Volunteer and GOTV Coordinator. Recently released on parole, he was attending Rhode Island College full-time while simultaneously recruiting canvassers, managing phone banks, and running data entry for the campaign. As Reilly later put it: "We needed to reestablish our citizenship and, like, our right to exist in society." As a parolee, and core member of Direct Action for Rights & Equality (DARE), participating in direct action protests against the Department of Corrections was precarious. His murder conviction posed the strategic question: how can the campaign incorporate people with serious convictions without alarming the electorate? The campaign chose to downplay his profile, even as he wrote, produced and directed a performance of "Voice of the Voiceless," set in prison, with panels following the play educating people about the campaign.⁸

"We needed to reestablish our citizenship and like, our right to exist in society."

Reilly went on to earn a law degree at Tulane University, in New Orleans, the only school that admitted him. He co-founded Formerly Incarcerated Convicted People & Families Movement (FICPFM), a national coalition, and since 2011, he has helped build Voice of the Experienced (VOTE) into a nationally recognized formerly incarcerated-led organization.

Andres Idarraga became one of the campaign's most visible spokespeople — and his personal story was compelling. An immigrant from Colombia, Idarraga had been sentenced to 14 years in a Rhode Island prison for drug dealing. He began his education behind bars, and upon release enrolled first at the University of Rhode Island, then transferred to Brown University. His trajectory from a prison cell to an Ivy League campus was a living argument for the proposition that people with felony convictions could be full citizens — and that access to education was the mechanism of transformation.⁹

His visibility came at a cost. An opponent he debated at Brown wrote a local op-ed arguing that Idarraga still belonged in prison. He received hate mail telling him to "go back to your country with the rest of your filth." As a newly released, naturalized citizen, the attacks underscored his precariousness — and fueled his determination to, as he later put it, "honor and maybe retroactively deserve" the opportunities he had been given. Idarraga's

journey did not end with the campaign. He went on to earn a law degree from Yale Law School (as a Paul & Daisy Soros Fellow) and an MBA from Northwestern's Kellogg School of Management, becoming an entrepreneur and lawyer in financial services. He, Reilly, and formerly incarcerated attorney Noah Kilroy co-founded the Transcending Through Education Foundation, a nonprofit dedicated to helping formerly incarcerated people access higher education — the very pathway that had transformed both their lives.

Ariel Werner, a Brown University sophomore, served as the student coordinator for the campaign. She had originally come to the issue through Students for Sensible Drug Policy but helped spin the voting rights effort into a standalone campaign to keep it focused. Werner also ran SPACE (Space in Prison for the Arts and Creative Expression) at the ACI, and recognized that students already working creatively with incarcerated people were natural recruits for the campaign. Her most consequential contribution came in the final weekend before the election, when she helped mobilize approximately 150 Brown University and Rhode Island College students to fan out across the six target cities for a massive canvassing push. That surge of door-knocking in the campaign's final hours is widely credited by organizers as a decisive factor in the outcome. Werner went on to earn a degree at the New York University School of Law and is currently an Assistant Federal Defender.³



Andres Idarraga at the Rhode Island State House

What bound these three together and defined the campaign's broader leadership, was an unusual alliance of lived experience and student mobilization. By centering formerly incarcerated organizers as strategic leaders rather than token messengers, and backing them with a disciplined student ground game, the campaign showed the electorate what active citizenship actually looked like. This fusion of raw personal stake and community solidarity became the ultimate blueprint for the movement

Marlon "Inphynit DaGhost" Carey — hip-hop artist, educator, and community organizer who was formerly incarcerated and active in the campaign — described the cultural register that gave the effort its authentic power:

“*There was something really important about doing it in the language of the prisoners — the voice of the voiceless. Their voice was the howl of hip-hop, and the hollers and chants of the downtrodden.*”¹⁰

SECTION V

The Casino Factor

The Right to Vote Campaign shared the November 2006 ballot with a referendum to authorize a resort casino in the town of West Warwick, backed by Harrah's Entertainment and the Narragansett Indian Tribe with tax proceeds dedicated to property-tax relief. Question 1 consumed extraordinary resources, making it one of the most expensive ballot measures in Rhode Island history, and drove statewide public discourse for weeks. According to Ballotpedia, \$18 million was spent in favor of the casino and \$5 million against.¹¹

But in the six urban communities where the Right to Vote Campaign had concentrated its ground game, the casino question was largely a non-issue. Bruce Reilly, who ran the campaign's GOTV operation, is direct about it: the casino campaign had minimal impact on urban turnout. People in Providence, Central Falls, and Woonsocket were not showing up to vote about a resort hotel in West Warwick. The casino campaign's canvassers were also poorly motivated — hired hands doing it for the money, not the cause. Some even passed out Question 2 materials on the same blocks.

The spending contrast was nonetheless staggering. The pro-casino side spent \$18 million on Question 1. The voting rights campaign that changed who counted as a citizen in Rhode Island spent \$347,464 — a ratio of roughly 52 to 1.

The Question 1 casino referendum failed decisively, with 63% voting against. Any statewide turnout it generated did not translate into a pool of sympathetic voters for Question 2 — the people motivated by the casino fight were not necessarily favorably disposed to voting rights restoration. The Right to Vote Campaign won despite the ballot environment, not because of it.

The Right to Vote Campaign won despite the ballot environment, not because of it.



South Kingstown Deputy Town Clerk, Susan P. Fazio, prepares voter lists for what is expected to be a high voter turnout at the gymnasium of the Curtis Center Middle School in South Kingstown.

Big voter turnout expected for an off-year election

BY PAUL BEAL

...in the state's history... turnout... expected... off-year election... turnout... expected... off-year election...

SOUTH COUNTY

...turnout... expected... off-year election... turnout... expected... off-year election...

ELECTION '06

...turnout... expected... off-year election... turnout... expected... off-year election...



The Providence Journal, November 7, 2006

SECTION VI

The Result: Victory by 11,527 Votes

On November 7, 2006, Rhode Island became the first state in the nation to restore voting rights to people with felony convictions through a public referendum.¹⁴ The measure passed with 51% of the vote — 191,956 to 180,429.

The official results from the Rhode Island Board of Elections confirm that the campaign's hyper-targeted strategy worked exactly as designed. Across the state's 33 suburban and rural cities and towns, the amendment lost by 7,192 votes. In the six urban centers where the campaign had concentrated its resources, it won by 18,719 votes — producing the statewide margin of 11,527. The campaign had done exactly what it set out to do: win the places it could win by enough to absorb the losses everywhere else.¹²

Providence alone accounted for 71% of the urban margin, making it overwhelmingly the decisive city.

TABLE 1

Question 2 Results by Target City

| CITY | YES | NO | MARGIN | YES % |
|--------------------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|--------------|
| Providence | 25,015 | 11,678 | +13,337 | 68.2% |
| Central Falls | 1,466 | 855 | +611 | 63.2% |
| Newport | 4,539 | 3,367 | +1,172 | 57.4% |
| East Providence | 9,054 | 8,048 | +1,006 | 52.9% |
| Woonsocket | 5,148 | 4,772 | +376 | 51.9% |
| Pawtucket | 9,966 | 7,749 | +2,217 | 56.3% |
| Six cities total | 55,188 | 36,469 | +18,719 | 60.2% |
| Rest of state (33 towns) | 136,768 | 143,960 | -7,192 | 48.7% |
| Statewide | 191,956 | 180,429 | +11,527 | 51.5% |

Source: Rhode Island Board of Elections, 2006 Primary & Election Count Book

Providence alone accounted for 71% of the urban margin, making it overwhelmingly the decisive city. Central Falls and Newport added meaningful support in terms of margin in favor.

A Super Election: Cross-Currents in a Conservative Democratic State

2006 was a Super Election in Rhode Island because virtually every major office was on the ballot simultaneously: Governor, Attorney General, the entire General Assembly (House and Senate), and U.S. Senate, plus the two contested constitutional questions. The combined weight drove turnout to approximately 55% of registered voters — a striking figure for a midterm election in a state where off-year turnout typically hovers between 41 and 47 percent.

But higher turnout did not mean a friendlier electorate for Question 2. Although Rhode Island is heavily Democratic in terms of registered voters, the party's support for criminal justice reform has never been assured. Mass incarceration, felony disenfranchisement, the Drug War, and discrimination against people with convictions have all enjoyed broad bipartisan backing — not just nationally, but within Rhode Island itself. Tough-on-crime politics cut across party lines in the state as they did everywhere — which meant a campaign asking voters to restore rights to people with felony convictions could not assume that a Democratic registration edge translated into a sympathetic majority.

TABLE 2

US Senate vs. Question 2 Results in Six Target Cities

| CITY | WHITEHOUSE (D) % | Q2 YES % | DIFFERENCE |
|-----------------|------------------|----------|--------------------------------|
| Central Falls | 76.8% | 63.2% | Q2 ran 13.7 points behind |
| Woonsocket | 63.6% | 51.9% | Q2 ran 11.7 points behind |
| Pawtucket | 66.1% | 56.3% | Q2 ran 9.8 points behind |
| East Providence | 60.8% | 52.9% | Q2 ran 7.8 points behind |
| Providence | 71.9% | 68.2% | Q2 ran 3.7 points behind |
| Newport | 54.4% | 57.4% | Q2 ran 3.0 points <i>ahead</i> |

Source: Rhode Island Board of Elections, 2006 Primary & Election Count Book

The data tells the story of the cross-currents. Rhode Island is widely noted as one of the most densely Catholic states in the nation, largely due to its history of Irish, Italian, and French Canadian immigration. Its political culture, though heavily Democratic on paper, has long carried a strain of social conservatism, particularly on criminal justice. It was not an electorate that could be assumed to favor the cause.

The Senate race illustrates the cross-currents directly. Republican incumbent Lincoln Chafee lost to Democratic challenger Sheldon Whitehouse in a nationally watched contest — but on the specific issue of voting rights, Chafee had been the more enthusiastic supporter of Question 2. Across the target cities, Question 2 ran significantly behind Whitehouse. In Central Falls, 76.8% of voters chose Whitehouse but only 63.2% voted YES on Question 2 — a gap of nearly 14 points. Voters were willing to elect a Democrat to the Senate while simultaneously resisting restoration of voting rights to people with felony convictions.

The Governor's race makes the point most starkly. Despite the national Democratic wave of 2006 — when Democrats recaptured both chambers of Congress — Republican incumbent Donald Carcieri defeated Democratic Lieutenant Governor Charles Fogarty by 51% to 49%, in one of the closest gubernatorial races in state history. A Republican was re-elected governor of one of the most heavily Democratic states in the country in a "blue wave" year. Newport stands as the one exception in the Senate data — the only target city where Question 2 outperformed Whitehouse, by 3 points — but it does not change the overall picture: this was not a friendly environment for criminal justice reform.

The campaign prevailed not because of the political environment but despite it — through the disciplined precision of concentrating resources in six urban communities, deploying canvassers whose authority came from lived experience, and closing the gap one door at a time in a state where even Democrats could not be assumed to be allies. The 11,527-vote margin of victory, carved out of a high-turnout election filled with cross-cutting pressures, stands as evidence of what purposeful advocacy can accomplish in genuinely complicated terrain.

Governor Donald Carcieri, a Republican, did not back the amendment. The Rhode Island Police Chiefs Association was the only statewide organization that formally opposed Question 2; Attorney General Patrick Lynch also declined to support it. The implementing legislation, House Bill 7938, became law without Carcieri's signature in July 2006 — a procedural path in Rhode Island that lets a governor allow a bill to take effect without endorsing it. On November 7, voters re-elected Carcieri to a second term while simultaneously ratifying the amendment he had declined to back. In the crucial implementation period that followed, the governor's office provided no public leadership on the law's rollout.¹³

Sol Rodriguez, Executive Director of the Family Life Center, said:

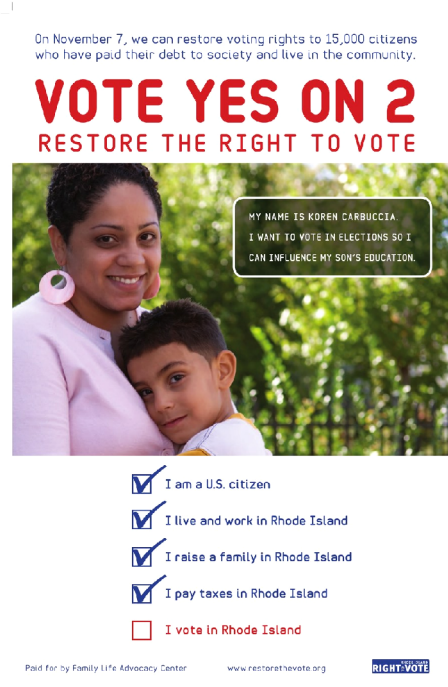
“*Voters have spoken for a stronger democracy in Rhode Island, one that includes the voices of all people who are living in our communities, working, paying taxes and supporting their families. Denying the right to vote to people with felony convictions who want to turn their lives around and become contributing members of society is counterproductive.*”¹⁴

The coalition that had backed Question 2 was remarkably broad: Providence Police Chief Colonel Dean Esserman, Senator Lincoln Chafee, Rhode Island Secretary of State Matthew A. Brown, the League of Women Voters, Common Cause, the ACLU, the NAACP, the State Council of Churches, and the Rhode Island Bar Association. The Right to Vote Campaign was also supported nationally by a joint effort of the ACLU, the Brennan Center for Justice, and The Sentencing Project.¹⁴

Among those who immediately regained the franchise was Andres Idarraga, who under the old law would not have regained his right to vote until 2037. Koren Carbuccia, a mother and student whose young son had just started school, was glad to be able to vote in her local school board elections. "With the right to vote, I can be a better parent now," she said.

It was a remarkable achievement — an approximately \$350,000 grassroots campaign, led substantially by people who were themselves on probation and parole, defeating the political establishment's indifference through sheer tactical precision and the credibility of lived experience.

John Marion, Executive Director of Common Cause Rhode Island, reflected on both the breadth of that achievement and the limitation it carried:



Campaign poster featuring Koren Carbuccia, 2006

“It was a great coalition that pushed real change, but was primarily focused on the establishment of reentry rights and not the implementation piece.”¹⁵

SECTION VII

Implementation: The Law on Paper

Passing the amendment was the beginning, not the end. With Question 2 ratified, the work shifted from public mobilization to the quieter, harder problem of ensuring the law actually reached the people it was written for.

The passage of Question 2 triggered the Rhode Island Restoration of Voting Rights Act (RIRVRA) — the companion legislation that the General Assembly had passed earlier in 2006, contingent on voter approval of the amendment. The law's core provisions, codified at R.I. Gen. Laws § 17-9.2 (Public Law 06-476), were straightforward: voting rights are lost only during actual incarceration and are automatically restored upon discharge. No application, no waiting period, no parole board review. The law applied retroactively — anyone who had finished their prison time before 2006 but was still on parole immediately regained their rights. The Department of Corrections was designated a voter registration agency, required to provide written notification, a registration form, and an offer of assistance to every person being released. Judges were required to notify defendants that they would lose the right to vote only for the duration of their incarceration. And the Secretary of State was charged with public education, bilingual publications, and training for corrections staff, parole officers, and election officials.

In August 2007, Secretary of State A. Ralph Mollis issued the formal rules and regulations operationalizing RIRVRA. The most consequential element was a data-sharing pipeline between RIDOC and the Elections Division. On the fifteenth of every month, RIDOC transmits two lists to the Secretary of State: one of people who have become ineligible to vote because of new incarceration, and one of people who have become eligible because of release. The Secretary of State uses these lists to keep the Statewide Central Voter Register current — flagging voters newly ineligible and restoring voters newly eligible — so the burden of re-registering after release does not fall on the individual. The regulations also spelled out training requirements for corrections and elections staff, bilingual publications, formal notification of judges about their advisement obligations, and a one-time provision that the Secretary of State would personally write to every person discharged between November 7, 2006 and the date of DOC's first monthly report. On paper, the system was engineered so that no formerly incarcerated person could pass through it without being told they had the right to vote.¹⁶

Steven Brown, Executive Director of the ACLU of Rhode Island and a veteran of the 2006 campaign, emphasized that what RIRVRA created was not a guideline or a best practice — it was a legal mandate:

“*One of the key things in 2006 — although I think the law may have been passed in 2005 in anticipation of the amendment — it did establish a statutory requirement. It's not just a policy. State law says DOC is required to essentially act as a voter registration agency when people are leaving the facility.*”¹⁷

Implementation in Practice: The Reentry Services Unit and the BNAF Form

The Department of Corrections did not always have a dedicated unit to carry out the voter-registration responsibilities that RIRVRA placed on it. A 2016 Council of State Governments Justice Center assessment, conducted under the federal Justice Reinvestment Initiative, documented an overburdened probation and corrections system with high caseloads, inconsistent supervision, and limited capacity for coordinated reentry services. Those findings drove the 2017 Justice Reinvestment legislation. Between 2020 and 2024, RIDOC reorganized in response. In 2021, RIDOC hired discharge planners as state employees for the first time; a new team of ten full-time positions was established under the Rhode Island Probation and Parole Unit, though the unit has never been fully staffed at that level. In 2024, that team was elevated into its own Reentry Services Unit under RIDOC's Rehabilitative Services Division, with staff centralized and relocated and new drop-in systems and procedures introduced to support the unit's operations.^{18, 19}

The principal mechanism through which the Unit informs people of their voting rights is a structured reentry group meeting. For individuals serving a sentence of 30 days or more, the Unit schedules these meetings in facilities beginning roughly six months before release, and each eligible person is offered three opportunities to attend. For people serving shorter sentences and for the awaiting-trial population, contact is more limited — typically only by phone or email. At the reentry group meeting, participants are handed the Reentry Services Basic Needs Assessment Form (BNAF), the document that operationalizes voter registration alongside the rest of the reentry checklist.²⁰

| REENTRY SERVICES BASIC NEEDS ASSESSMENT FORM | |
|---|--|
| Instructions: This form is used to assess the basic needs of reentering individuals. The information provided enables the Reentry Services Unit to evaluate the appropriate level and type of support services to facilitate a successful reintegration back to the community. | |
| First & Last Name: _____ | RIDOC ID#: _____ |
| What city/town are you returning to? _____ | |
| Anticipated Post-Release Address: _____ | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Homeless <input type="checkbox"/> Staying with friends or family ("couch-surfing") | |
| Whose address are you providing? <input type="checkbox"/> My Own <input type="checkbox"/> Relative/Friend <input type="checkbox"/> Mail Only | |
| Anticipated Post-Release Phone Number: _____ | |
| Whose phone number are you providing? <input type="checkbox"/> My Own <input type="checkbox"/> Relative <input type="checkbox"/> Friend | |
| DOCUMENTS & RESOURCES | |
| Please indicate which of the below items, if any, you would like assistance obtaining prior to your release. | |
| Application Assistance: | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> EBT/SNAP (Food Stamps) | Prior to incarceration, I received <input type="checkbox"/> EBT/SNAP benefits. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Health Insurance | Prior to incarceration, I received <input type="checkbox"/> Medicaid <input type="checkbox"/> Medicare coverage. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> State ID or Duplicate RI Driver's License | No Fee Must be 30+ days from release |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Copy of my Birth Certificate | Fees apply, payable via inmate accounts Must be 4+ months from release |
| <input type="checkbox"/> RI <input type="checkbox"/> Other State: | No Fee Must be 4+ months from release |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Duplicate Social Security Card | No Fee Must be 4+ months from release |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Registering to Vote | If you do not want to register for any reason, you still must complete a Certification Form. |
| Resources Requested: | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 1-Hour Bus Passes | <input type="checkbox"/> Toiletries |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Gently Worn Clothing (list sizes) | <input type="checkbox"/> Snacks & Water: Any Food Allergies? |
| Shirt: _____ | Sweatshirt/Jacket: _____ |
| Pants: _____ | Waist: _____ Length: _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other (please indicate): _____ | |
| REENTRY SERVICES AGREEMENT | |
| Please check the appropriate boxes below to indicate the services you would like to accept or decline from the Reentry Services Unit. You can request help later if you change your mind. | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I want to ACCEPT the Reentry Services indicated above by checking all the appropriate boxes and: | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> YES, I would like to meet with a Reentry Coordinator to further discuss my reentry needs; OR | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> NO, I do not want to meet with a Reentry Coordinator at this time | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I want to DECLINE all Reentry Services at this time. | |
| By signing below, I agree to engage with the RIDOC Reentry Services Unit to accomplish the above-mentioned tasks. | |
| Client Signature _____ | Date _____ |

Updated 7/1/25

FIGURE 2 RIDOC Reentry Services Basic Needs Assessment Form (Updated 7/1/25)

The BNAF is where the system's structural gaps begin to show.

The first gap is in attendance. Although the meetings are scheduled in advance, incarcerated individuals are not notified about them in a consistent way across facilities. As a result, not every eligible person ends up attending a session, even though they are given three opportunities. For those who never make it into the room, the form, and with it the voter registration moment, never arrives.

The second gap is in the form itself. Voter registration appears as one line item among many broader reentry services: food stamps, health insurance, state ID, birth certificate, Social Security card. The form is designed to assess basic needs for reintegration, not to ensure civic restoration.

The third — and most consequential — gap is at the bottom of the form. After checking which services they want, individuals choose between accepting reentry services (with or without a meeting with a Reentry Coordinator) or declining all services entirely. Many decline. Opting out at this point does not just prevent voter registration from happening; it disconnects the individual from the entire benefits-and-services pipeline they may need on the other side of release — housing referrals, Medicaid enrollment, ID assistance, and the voter registration form alike.

Two structural failures sit underneath these gaps: the reentry group meetings are optional, and the Reentry Services Unit is not fully staffed. The paperwork may be provided, but the conversation — the meaningful explanation of what the paperwork means and why it matters — is not guaranteed. Recommendations to close these gaps are taken up later in the report.

SECTION VIII

The Twenty-Year Gap: Winning a Right, Losing the Message

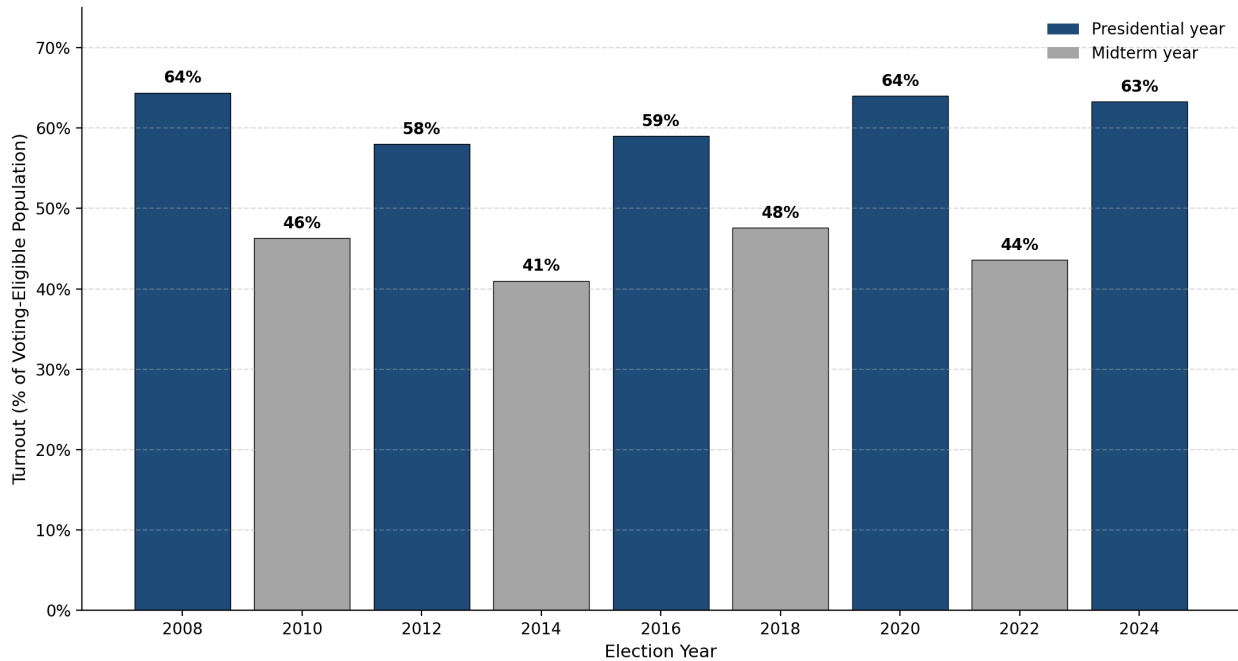
The 2006 amendment narrowed the legal reach of felony disenfranchisement, but it did not dissolve the racial disparity at its core. Because the disenfranchised population in Rhode Island today is essentially the incarcerated population, and because Black Rhode Islanders are still incarcerated at roughly 9.4 times the rate of white Rhode Islanders, the communities that carried the heaviest burden under the old regime continue to carry the heaviest burden under the new one.²¹

The grassroots energy that had won the Amendment did not translate into an ongoing infrastructure.

Rhode Island's experience reflects a national pattern. As The Sentencing Project has documented, removing legal barriers to voting is "necessary but not sufficient" for full democratic participation among justice-impacted people. As of 2024, an estimated 4 million Americans remained disenfranchised due to felony convictions — down from 5.9 million in 2016, thanks to advocacy-driven reforms in 26 states and the District of Columbia since 1997²². But even where rights have been restored, turnout among eligible voters with felony convictions remains strikingly low. Researchers estimate that being convicted of a crime is associated with a 15 percentage point decline in likelihood of voting — and a 25 percentage point decline among people who have served time in prison²³. The reasons are compounding: confusion about eligibility, diminished trust in government, material instability, and — critically — the fact that justice-impacted people are systematically "neglected in outreach efforts by political parties, pro-democracy organizations, and outreach campaigns that traditionally engage in voter mobilization"²⁴.

In 2008, the first election cycle where the newly enfranchised population could fully participate, just 3,001 of 17,606 eligible individuals cast a ballot — a turnout rate of 17%.²⁶ The grassroots energy that had won the amendment did not translate into an ongoing infrastructure for voter education and mobilization among the formerly incarcerated. The campaign disbanded. The state did not fill the gap.

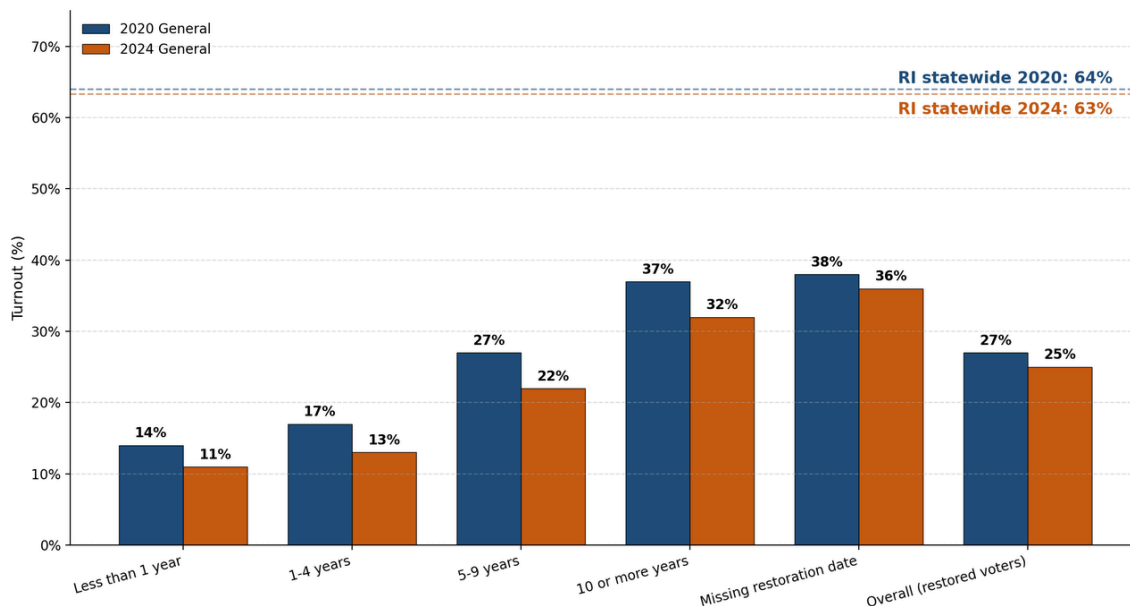
Twenty years later, the consequences of that silence are measurable. Rhode Island's overall voter turnout has remained relatively healthy — ranging from 41% to 64% across election cycles since 2008, with presidential-year turnout consistently above 58%.



Source: RI Secretary of State, RI Board of Elections, U.S. Elections Project, Ballotpedia. VEP = Voting-Eligible Population. Some pre-2020 figures are best available estimates.

FIGURE 3 Rhode Island General Election Voter Turnout, 2008–2024²⁶

But for the population the 2006 amendment was designed to enfranchise, the picture is starkly different. Data from the Rhode Island Secretary of State's Elections Division shows that voter turnout among people with restored rights remains far below the general population:



Source: RI Department of State Elections Division voter records, March 2026 (per RIFC Felony Restoration Voter Analysis). Dashed lines show RI statewide VEP turnout for comparison.

FIGURE 4 Voter Turnout Among Rights-Restored Citizens by Time Since Restoration — Presidential Year Elections²⁶

The contrast with the general population is devastating, particularly when reviewing turnout in the two most recent presidential election years. For example, Rhode Island statewide turnout was 63% in 2024. Among the people with restored voting rights, it was 25% — less than half. Among those in their first year out, it was 11% in 2024, roughly one-sixth the statewide rate.

The pattern is clear: turnout effectively triples over a decade of release, rising from roughly 11-14% in the first year to 32-37% after ten years. People eventually find their way to the polls — but slowly, without institutional support, and only after achieving the material stability that makes civic participation possible.

The most urgent cohort is the recently released: people in their first year out, voting at just 11%. These are individuals at the moment of maximum disorientation — navigating housing, employment, addiction, family court — and falling through the gaps in the very system that RIRVRA designed to catch them.

SECTION IX

The 2026 Original Research: Who is Being Left Behind?

This report is based on original research conducted by the Rhode Island Freedom Collective and supported by students at the Harvard Kennedy School who helped facilitate a series of discussion groups with individuals who have direct experience with the justice system. We listened to their stories and collected data to better understand the barriers that prevent justice-impacted people from exercising their right to vote.

Roughly three-quarters of participants did not know that the 2006 law existed.

The Rhode Island Freedom Collective was founded by Kyle Campbell, Mario Monteiro, and Steven Parkhurst — three men who were sentenced to life as juveniles and, after release, built RIFC to support people returning from incarceration. The research presented in this section is theirs; the questions it asks are the questions they have lived.



RIFC co-founders at the Rhode Island State House

In March 2026, the Rhode Island Freedom Collective conducted two facilitated discussion groups at Amos House in Providence with 38 formerly incarcerated participants recruited through RIFC's community networks. Each participant completed a background questionnaire and engaged in facilitated group discussion about voting rights, discharge experiences, and civic participation.²⁷

The quantitative data established the scope of the problem. The facilitated discussions revealed its texture.

The Central Finding: They Did Not Know

The most important data point from the background questionnaires was unambiguous.

Roughly three-quarters of participants did not know that the 2006 law existed. Only about one in four answered "yes" when asked whether they knew that people with felony convictions could vote in Rhode Island upon release from incarceration.

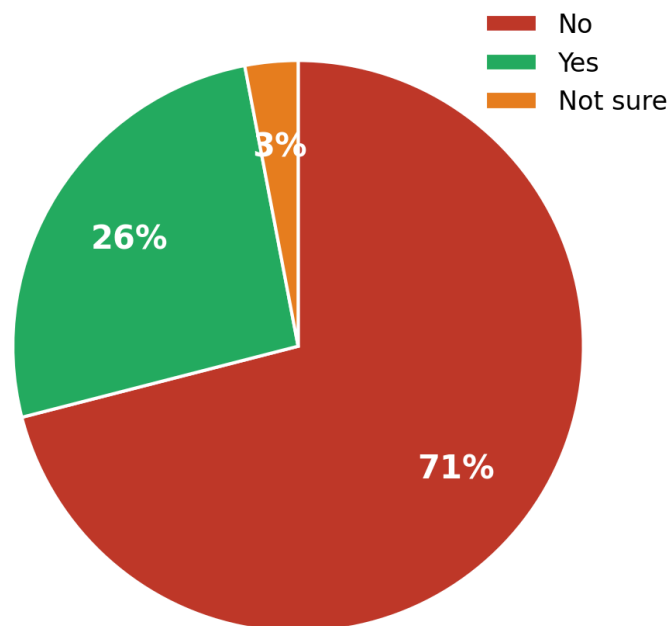


FIGURE 5 Knowledge of the 2006 Voting Rights Law

This was not a finding about apathy. When participants learned during the sessions that their right to vote had been legally restored — in some cases, years or even decades ago — the reaction was immediate. One participant, who had been incarcerated in Massachusetts, said he had been telling other people for years that they couldn't vote. He learned the truth at that table. Another participant, who had the resources to hire lawyers

after his conviction, had not known until that morning. The 2006 law — the one that 51% of Rhode Island voters approved, that the Brennan Center helped draft, that the Secretary of State's office issued regulations to implement, that required DOC to hand people voter registration forms at the gate — had, for most of the people in that room, simply never arrived.

What the Discussions Revealed

The discharge process failed everyone. Across both sessions, the dominant experience at discharge was paperwork included in a release packet with little or no explanation, cursory questions about voter registration asked without context, and a person too focused on getting out the door to understand what they were agreeing to or declining.

Half of the participants said they didn't receive any transition or reentry services before release, reflecting the structural gaps identified earlier: reentry group meetings are not communicated consistently, and participants have the opportunity to opt out. Even accounting for opt-outs, the scale of the gap is significant. Reentry services exist on paper, but the delivery is failing the people it is meant to serve. These services are available but not mandatory, and for too many, they simply never happen.

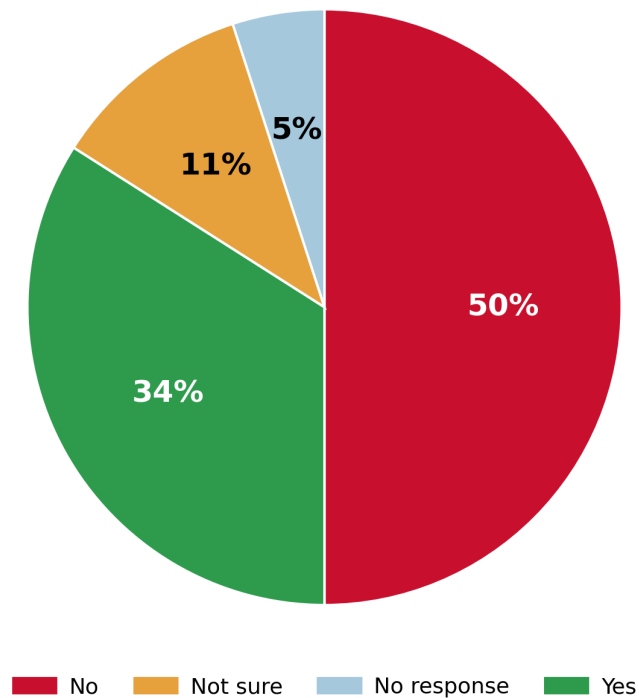


FIGURE 6 Received Transition/Reentry Services Before Release

Sixty-three percent of participants reported receiving no voting rights information at discharge whatsoever. Only 16% were told verbally; only 13% received written materials. One participant described her discharge planner as helpful — she got a Salvation Army gift card for clothes, referrals to Amos House, a blanket. But: "She didn't say anything about voting. There was no paperwork for voting, nothing."

Kyle Campbell, RIFC co-founder, offered perhaps the most damning testimony: when he was granted parole in 2022, he completed his voter registration papers with the discharge planner. On the day of his release, those papers had disappeared. He lost his chance to vote in his first eligible election.

Material deprivation is inseparable from civic disengagement. Fifty-one percent of participants reported being in transitional housing or otherwise housing-insecure situations (of those who answered; many participants did not respond to this question). This includes individuals in temporary arrangements, staying with family or friends, or lacking stable permanent housing — not state-supported transitional housing, which Rhode Island does not provide. The majority (22 participants) were actively seeking work, with only a small number in part-time positions. One participant was living under a bridge on Cranston Street. When you do not have stable housing, when you are navigating family court and pending charges while trying to stay sober — being told to register to vote requires more than information. It requires trust, material support, and a messenger you believe in.

The messengers matter. Emerging research confirms what RIFC's sessions demonstrated intuitively. Field experiments in North Carolina and Minnesota found that simply reaching out and inviting formerly incarcerated people to vote — even through a mailer — increased voter registration by one to two percentage points, a modest but meaningful gain given that baseline registration among previously unregistered individuals was below 10%. More promisingly, research by Hannah Walker at the University of Texas²⁵ has found that *relational organizing* — where prospective voters are contacted by a friend, loved one, or respected peer rather than a stranger — can be far more effective. As The Sentencing Project concludes, "the more personalized the outreach, the better," and being "actively recruited to vote is among the strongest predictors of actually doing so on Election Day"²⁴.

This is precisely what RIFC does — and the sessions bore it out. In both sessions, the reason people showed up, stayed, opened up, and left motivated was the same: Steven Parkhurst and Kyle Campbell. Two men who together served 60 years in prison, who are still in the Amos House community, who meet people in the prison parking lot with Freedom Packs on release day. The third RIFC co-founder, Mario Monteiro, was released in July 2024 after serving 23 years for a crime he committed at 17. His case inspired "Mario's Law" — the Youthful Offender Act, which allows people sentenced to life as children to apply for parole after 20 years. Monteiro is now a tree steward with Garden Time, planting trees across Rhode Island. As he wrote in *The Marshall Project* in April 2026:

“*I — a human being — wasn't broken beyond repair. I just needed tending. When society gives us the opportunity to grow, we become powerful allies in the fight to save other young lives and our communities. We know where the cracks are because we've fallen through them. We speak the language of survival and transformation.*”²⁸

That credibility — earned through decades of incarceration and the daily work of rebuilding — is what institutional outreach cannot replicate. Their authority is not institutional — it is lived. As one participant put it:

“*You guys came from where I came and are doing big things... It's an inspiration, man. It really is. It shows like — you've been there and now you're doing something because you care about it.*”

Local elections are a revelation. A consistent theme was a growing recognition that local elections — for mayor, city council, state representatives — have more direct impact on daily life than presidential elections. One participant, a formerly incarcerated attorney released just 54 days before the session, noted: “I only find myself voting in the major elections, like presidential elections. It's not until recently where I realized how important local elections are to my everyday life.” Kyle Campbell, RIFC co-founder, made the connection explicit: “If you know who your representative is, you can hold whatever agency you feel is discriminating against you accountable.”

Cross-state misinformation compounds the problem. The second discussion group held at Amos House included participants who had been incarcerated in North Carolina, Florida, Arizona, Pennsylvania, New York, and Connecticut. Several had been told *explicitly* in other states that their felony conviction meant they could never vote again. One participant described his post-release experience in North Carolina, where his supervisor actively encouraged him to vote and explained his rights — a striking contrast with Rhode Island's silence. The problem is not just that Rhode Island fails to inform people of their rights; it is that misinformation from other states follows people across state lines and goes uncorrected.

Who Participated

The largest age cohort was in the 35 to 44 years old age range.

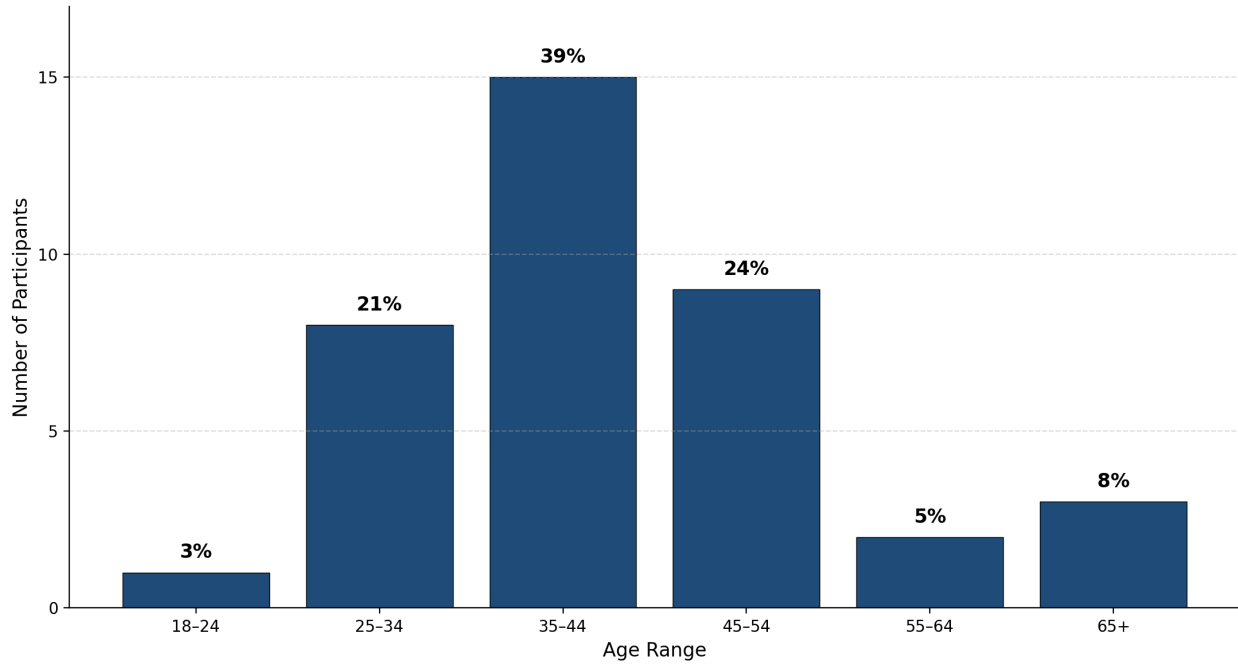


FIGURE 7 Age Distribution

SECTION X

Policy and Advocacy Recommendations

The findings point to a specific, identifiable failure: not in the law itself, but in the mechanism of its delivery. RIRVRA's regulatory framework is comprehensive. The problem is that the system relies on documentation — forms in packets, written notices, declination forms — without requiring the human conversation that gives those documents meaning.

The RIFC model demonstrates that peer-led outreach carries a credibility that institutional actors cannot replicate.

1. Mandatory Transition Planning Meetings for All Individuals Serving More Than 30 Days

The single most consequential recommendation emerging from this research is structural: **every person leaving RIDOC custody after serving more than 30 days should be required to meet with a Reentry Coordinator to review transition planning — including voting rights — unless they affirmatively opt out.** Currently, individual meetings with DOC Reentry Coordinators are available but not mandatory. Reentry groups begin at six months before release, but many individuals — particularly those serving shorter sentences — pass through the system without a meaningful conversation about their rights and resources.

This shift requires no new legislation; it simply enforces what RIRVRA regulations already contemplate. While RIRVRA dictates that the Department of Corrections "offer that person assistance," an offer buried in a stack of discharge paperwork is meaningless. True assistance requires a scheduled meeting with a Reentry Coordinator, where voting rights are explained alongside housing, employment, healthcare, and identification..

2. Adequately Resource the Reentry Services Unit

Meaningful discharge planning requires a realistic alignment of personnel and resources. As of early 2026, there are approximately 50 full-time employees supporting probation and parole, and only about half a dozen tasked with reentry coordination for a comparable

population. The State must conduct a formal caseload and fiscal analysis – comparing staffing in Reentry Services to Probation and Parole – to determine the staffing levels necessary to ensure that every transitioning citizen receives the individualized civic on-ramp contemplated by the 2006 law. The current staffing levels are inadequate, and the right personnel with the right experience and tenure need to be recruited to do this important work.

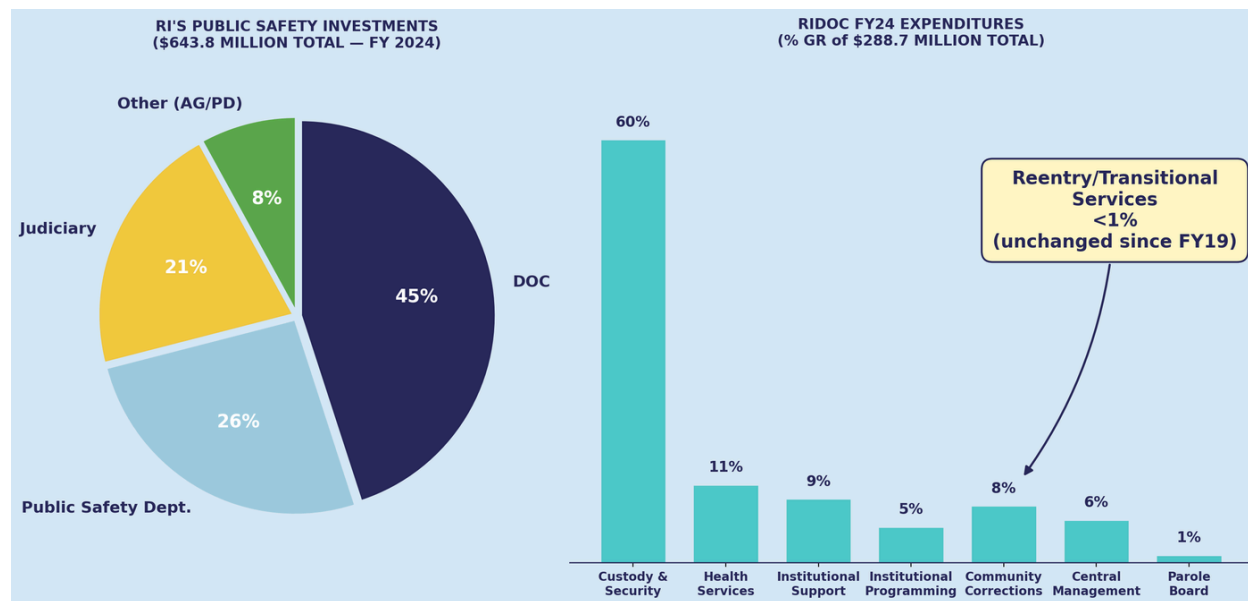


FIGURE 8 Rhode Island's Investments in Reentry Services, Fiscal Year 2024

Source: State of Rhode Island's FY 2024 budget.

Despite significant increases in total public safety spending over the past five years, resources allocated to reentry and transitional services have remained at less than 1% of RIDOC's budget.

3. Explained Voter Registration as Part of Discharge Planning

“ *When I got out of jail... I don't remember getting anything about voting. I remember getting [a] packet on welfare benefits and whatnot, like how to get my license back and stuff like that, but I don't know getting anything on voting.* ”¹²⁷

Voter registration should not be a standalone bureaucratic event. It should be embedded in the broader transition planning conversation as one element of civic reintegration. When a Reentry Coordinator reviews housing options, employment referrals, Medicaid enrollment, and state ID replacement – all of which are currently part of RIDOC's reentry

services — voter registration should be explained in the same meeting, with the same level of care. The question "Do you want to register to vote?" should never be asked without first explaining: "You have the right to vote. That right was restored the moment you were released. Here is why it matters and how to do it."

4. Peer-Led Community Integration into the Discharge Process

The RIFC model demonstrates that peer-led outreach carries a credibility that institutional actors cannot replicate. A growing body of national research supports this approach. Field experiments in Connecticut, North Carolina, Minnesota, and Texas have shown that targeted outreach — particularly through relational organizing, where trusted peers contact justice-impacted individuals directly — can meaningfully increase voter registration and turnout²⁵. RIDOC should establish formal partnership agreements with formerly incarcerated-led organizations such as RIFC and Amos House to participate in pre-release reentry groups, to be present at the point of discharge, and to provide follow-up contact in the days after release. The "Freedom Pack" model — cell phones, bus passes, gift cards, and backpacks provided at the prison parking lot — is not just a survival kit. It is a trust-building intervention that creates the psychological space for democratic participation.

This was noted several times in the interviews which were conducted. Marlon "Inphynit DaGhost" Carey said:

“ *"You can't talk to a person who does not have the experience. I felt like a freshly shaved sheep. I just didn't feel comfortable with the world."*¹⁰

Community activist and co-founder of the Full Citizens Coalition James Jeter echoed the sentiment:

“ *"You can't get through to them unless somebody with lived experience is talking to them. It has to be community led — not an agency or someone from the outside who doesn't understand their culture or their lives."*²⁹

5. Hyper-Local Voter Education Outreach

“ *"You need to come to the trenches with the flyers. Like show these people like where they get the information from... Come to Raj Street, come to Elmwood, Cranston... show us the flyers, give us the information, come to the heart of the city."*²⁷

Voter education must move beyond institutional channels and into the neighborhoods where justice-impacted people actually live. State and municipal governments should fund and partner with community-based organizations to deliver voter education directly within the neighborhoods where justice-impacted individuals live. As participants in the discussion groups urged, outreach should be focused on residential streets — Elmwood, Cranston Street, South Providence — not just downtown Providence or Kennedy Plaza. Targeted education campaigns on social media platforms (TikTok, Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram) should put information directly into people's daily feeds, bypassing the institutional mistrust that prevents many from seeking out government resources. A practical first step is a small, targeted grant program that supports community-based organizations to do this work in the neighborhoods named above.

6. Civic Education as a Part of Rehabilitation

“*It's about information and education, making sure everyone in this room is informed about what's happening around them when it comes to law, when it comes to voting, when it comes to your everyday rights.*”²⁷

The prison experience must be oriented toward preparing people to engage as productive members of society after release. While the Department of Corrections is not well-positioned to design civic education, the Rhode Island Secretary of State's office is. The Secretary of State should be engaged as a partner to provide civic education and voter registration conversations inside facilities and at community hubs serving formerly incarcerated people.

7. Utilizing Community Hubs for Voter Education

Voter education must reach into the community networks where justice-impacted people seek support. Probation and parole offices are natural community hubs—points of regular, mandatory contact for thousands of Rhode Islanders. By prominently displaying registration materials within these offices, RI Courts, and Pre-Trial Services, the RI Judiciary and Probation can seamlessly integrate civic rights education into their daily operations.

SECTION XI

Areas for Further Research

This case study raises several questions that warrant additional investigation:

Reentry Coordinator staffing adequacy. Are RIDOC's Reentry Services Unit staffing levels adequate to provide meaningful transition planning for all individuals being released? The unit was established as a standalone entity only in 2024. Further research should assess current caseloads, identify optimal staffing ratios, and determine what resources would be needed to provide comprehensive discharge planning for all individuals serving more than 30 days.

Cost-benefit analysis of expanded transition services. What is the economic return on investment from providing more robust reentry services? If expanded transition planning reduces recidivism, the savings in incarceration costs alone may justify the investment. Rhode Island spends significant resources per incarcerated individual annually; even modest reductions in recidivism could generate substantial savings.

Rhode Island recidivism rates in regional context. How do Rhode Island's recidivism rates compare with those of other New England states? A comparative analysis could illuminate whether Rhode Island's approach to discharge planning is producing better or worse outcomes than its neighbors, and identify best practices from states with lower rates of reincarceration.

Long-term civic engagement outcomes. The Secretary of State's data shows that voter turnout among people with restored rights increases over time, tripling from the first year to the tenth. What drives this increase? Is it primarily material stability, civic education, peer influence, or some combination? Understanding the mechanisms could inform more targeted interventions.

Field experiments in voter mobilization. The Sentencing Project²⁴ has documented a growing body of experimental research testing what modes and messages are most effective in mobilizing justice-impacted voters. Researchers at the Minnesota Justice Research Center tested combinations of texts, phone calls, and mailers with justice-oriented vs. vot-

Rhode Island, with its concentrated geography, strong community organizations, and a well-defined rights-restored population, is an ideal site for similar randomized controlled trials.

er-education messaging; results showed that any contact increased likelihood of voting. The University of Texas relational organizing study found that encouragements from loved ones may be highly effective. Rhode Island, with its concentrated geography, strong community organizations, and a well-defined rights-restored population, is an ideal site for similar randomized controlled trials. RIFC's existing networks and RIDOC's monthly discharge data could form the basis for a rigorous evaluation of what works — and what doesn't — in moving people from eligibility to the ballot box.

Data infrastructure for outreach evaluation. One of the most significant challenges identified by national researchers is the difficulty of linking criminal justice records, contact information, and voter registration files to evaluate outreach effectiveness²⁵. Rhode Island's small size and centralized corrections system offer a structural advantage. A partnership between RIDOC, the Secretary of State's Elections Division, and academic researchers could create a linked data infrastructure that enables ongoing evaluation of discharge planning reforms — measuring not just whether forms were distributed, but whether people actually registered and voted.

SECTION XII

Conclusion

In 2006, a \$347,464 grassroots campaign — led by a coalition of formerly incarcerated advocates, Brown University students, civil rights organizations, and legal architects at the Brennan Center for Justice — persuaded 51% of Rhode Island voters to amend their state's constitution and restore voting rights to people with felony convictions upon their release from incarceration. It was the first time in American history that such a right had been restored through a public referendum.⁷

The campaign's strategy was a case study in disciplined, resource-efficient advocacy: fly under the radar in unsupportive territory, concentrate resources in six urban communities, deploy messengers whose credibility came from lived experience, and win despite cross-cutting pressures — a super election year, a ballot with an \$18 million pro-casino campaign, and a political culture in which Democrats could not be assumed to favor the cause. The Right to Vote Campaign spent 52 times less than the pro-casino side on the same ballot — and it was the \$347,464 campaign, not the \$18 million one, that changed the state's constitution. The result was a victory by 11,527 votes that redefined the boundaries of citizenship in Rhode Island.

Twenty years later, the legal right is secure. But the promise of that right has not been fulfilled. Nearly three-quarters of the people it was designed to help do not know it exists. The regulatory framework that was supposed to ensure every returning citizen learned of their rights has been undermined not by malice but by mechanism: paperwork without conversation, documentation without explanation, a system that treats voter registration as a checkbox rather than a civic on-ramp. Representative Edith Ajello noted that even staffing is sometimes not a priority, or gets lost in the political process.³⁰

The Rhode Island Freedom Collective's 2026 research — conducted by formerly incarcerated people, for formerly incarcerated people, at a community table in Providence — is evidence of what it takes to make a right real. It requires messengers who have lived the experience. It requires material support that creates the stability necessary for civic participation. And it requires institutions that move beyond passive compliance to active engagement.

James Jeter from the Full Citizens Coalition took it a step further:

“*Voting is a long-term investment in the game, but the (previously incarcerated) are hurting NOW. We need to show them that you can't take back the economics if you don't own the civics.*”²⁹

The Rhode Island Freedom Collective and Harvard University researchers came to Amos House — to a room of people in transitional housing and recovery, people with decades in prison, people who had never voted — because the expertise in that room was valued and respected. The knowledge of what it means to be released without information, without support, without a voice is not something that can be learned from a policy brief. It can only come from people who have lived it. RIFC's partnership with Harvard represents exactly the kind of collaboration this work demands: academic rigor joined with lived experience, directed toward making a twenty-year-old right finally real.

A right that is unknown is a right that does not exist. Rhode Island won this right twenty years ago. It is past time to make it real.

E N D N O T E S

Endnotes

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5. Daniel Schleifer, "Unlocking the Vote: Activists and disenfranchised former felons restore voting rights in Rhode Island," *The Nation*, December 5, 2006 (in print, December 18, 2006 issue).
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7. Ballotpedia, "Rhode Island Question 2, Restoration of Voting Rights Act (2006)," election results and campaign finance via Follow the Money / National Institute on Money in State Politics. Available at ballotpedia.org.
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9. Andres Idarraga, campaign spokesperson, Rhode Island Right to Vote Campaign, interview by author, March 2026.
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We are deeply grateful for their investment in this work and their commitment to ensuring that the right to vote reaches everyone it was meant to reach.



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The RI **FREEDOM** Collective

The RI Freedom Collective is committed to empowering those directly impacted by the criminal justice system. We believe that the people most affected by unjust policies should be the ones leading the fight for reform.

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