

Testimony in Support of HB 8328

An Act Related to Courts and Civil Procedure – Permitting Virtual or Remote Court Hearings

House Judiciary Committee

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Hector Perez-Aponte, Racial Justice Policy Analyst, the Economic Progress Institute

The Economic Progress Institute strongly supports Representative Diaz’s HB 8328, which would permit all Rhode Island courts to conduct hearings remotely and allow any party or attorney to appear by telephone or video conference, with remote appearances having the same legal effect as in-person appearances. The bill will not change the court’s ability to accept or deny a request for a hearing but will allow individuals to request a remote hearing. This proposal will ensure that all Rhode Islanders can access justice safely and conveniently.

All Rhode Islanders deserve safe and convenient access to the justice system. Unfortunately, one of the main reasons why community members struggle to attend their court hearings is due to competing responsibilities, such as taking time off from work, as well as logistical barriers like unreliable transportation. According to the Crime and Justice Institute, 49% of the people they surveyed indicated that both taking time off from work and securing reliable transportation made attending their court date difficult.¹

These barriers also present significant equity concerns. Communities of color are more likely to face economic instability, inflexible work hours, and have limited access to transportation.² This disparity is further compounded by transit inequities: the Rhode Island Public Transit Authority reports that the majority of its riders are people of color, and recent service reductions risk further limiting these communities’ access to reliable transportation – making it even more difficult to attend in-person court hearings.^{3,4}

For immigrants especially, the consequences could be disastrous. Many immigrants are missing their court hearings due to fear of interacting with federal immigration law enforcement.⁵ Failure to attend an immigration court hearing typically results in an individual automatically being deported.⁶ If deported, those with lawful status may experience a permanent bar from reentering the U.S. without special permission.⁷ In some cases, legal permanent residents (LPRs) live in “mixed-status households” with

¹ <https://www.cj institute.org/assets/sites/2/2025/02/What-Really-Prevents-Court-Appearance.pdf>

² <https://fortune.com/2024/04/17/black-workers-irregular-schedule-long-hours-health-risk-depression-heart-disease/>

³ <https://ecori.org/ripta-survey-finds-majority-of-bus-riders-are-people-of-color/#:~:text=About%2057%25%20of%20the%20riders,why%20they%20take%20public%20transit.>

⁴ https://pvdstreets.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/Service-Impacts-Report_package.pdf

⁵ <https://www.providencejournal.com/story/news/politics/2025/10/17/ice-presence-at-ri-courthouses-has-pvd-council-urging-remote-hearings/86744205007/>

⁶ [https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/fact-sheet/immigrants-and-families-appear-court/#:~:text=Share:,for%20%E2%80%9Cin%20absence%E2%80%9D\).](https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/fact-sheet/immigrants-and-families-appear-court/#:~:text=Share:,for%20%E2%80%9Cin%20absence%E2%80%9D).)

⁷ <https://www.hdezlaw.com/blog/2025/06/how-criminal-charges-can-affect-your-immigration-status/>

U.S. children. **When LPRs are deported, many are forced to take their children with them or leave them behind – effectively deporting U.S. citizens and/or breaking up families.**⁸

Along with tearing communities and families apart, deportations can have negative consequences on a state's economy. Deportations often lead to labor shortages, which can increase the cost of goods and cause businesses to shrink.⁹ Research has shown that increases in immigration enforcement can also lead to a contraction in the direct care sector – Rhode Island's largest employment sector.¹⁰ In a time where immigrants are increasingly under threat of being deported from the U.S., permitting virtual hearings represents an effective step towards protecting Rhode Islanders from unnecessary and irreversible harm.

We strongly urge passage of HB 8328.

⁸ <https://nipnlg.org/news/press-releases/us-children-are-being-forced-deportation-public-deserves-truth>

⁹ <https://www.congress.gov/119/meeting/house/117980/documents/HHRG-119-GO00-20250305-SD020.pdf>

¹⁰ <https://www.epi.org/blog/trumps-deportation-plans-threaten-400000-direct-care-jobs-older-adults-and-people-with-disabilities-could-lose-vital-in-home-support/>