
The SMITH HILL REPORT



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Session Opens

The 2025 session of the Rhode Island General Assembly starts tomorrow. The day will be dedicated to swearing in all General Assembly members, including the new Senators and Representatives. The House and Senate begin their weekly meetings this week and are expected to conclude the session in late June. The next two months will consist of new legislation being filed and the commencement of committee hearings. Information about the General Assembly, including lists of Senators and Representatives, bill text, bill hearing schedules and an archive of video recordings of committee meetings can all be found on the RI General Assembly website www.rilegislature.gov.

2024 Highlights

The RIFTHP enjoyed a very productive and positive session last year. We prioritized pension improvements and, working with the AFL-CIO and other public sector unions, were able to secure a better retirement formula for all future public employee retirees by changing the final average salary calculation. Major legislative accomplishments in 2024 included:

- **Final Average Salary Improvement** - Restoring the pension calculation using an average of the highest consecutive three years instead of five years.
- **Preserve Education Funding** - The rejection of the Governor's proposal to reduce education aid by creating a CPI cap which would have reduced education funding by \$25.6 million this year alone.
- **Hope Scholarship Extension** - Extending the Hope Scholarship pilot program at RIC for an additional two years.
- **Teacher Post Retirement Employment** - Extending the number of days retired teachers can work from ninety to one hundred eighty without impacting their retirement for an additional year while requiring districts to make appropriate pension contributions.

- **Higher Education Post Retirement Employment** - Raising the income ceiling, retired Adjunct Professors at our public institutions of higher education can earn from \$18,000 to \$25,000 without a reduction in benefits.
- **Pension COLA Improvements** - Restoration of annual cost of living increases for anyone who retired prior to June 30, 2012, and reducing the funding ratio from eighty per cent to seventy-five per cent before post-2012 retirees are eligible for an annual cost of living increase.
- **MLL Education Funding** – Implementing a five percent increase in Multi Language Learner funding included in the core instruction formula, not as a categorical expenditure.
- **School Meals** - Expanding the eligibility criteria for free and reduced breakfast and lunch programs to provide daily free meals for more students.

2024 Election Results

The 2025-26 General Assembly will closely resemble the 2023-2024 General Assembly.

Many incumbents did not face re-election challenges and most incumbents who had competitive races won their election in November. While the National elections yielded major changes in administration, elections largely supported the status quo in the Rhode Island General Assembly.

The RIFTHP endorsed the incumbent federal delegation running on the 2024 ballot. US Senator Sheldon Whitehouse, and US Representatives Gabe Amo and Seth Magaziner all won their elections.

The RIFTHP supported all bond questions and all the bond questions on the November ballot were approved by the voters. The Union also opposed Question 1, the ballot question asking voter approval of a Constitutional Convention. Voters rejected a Constitutional Convention by a 62.4 to 37.6% margin.

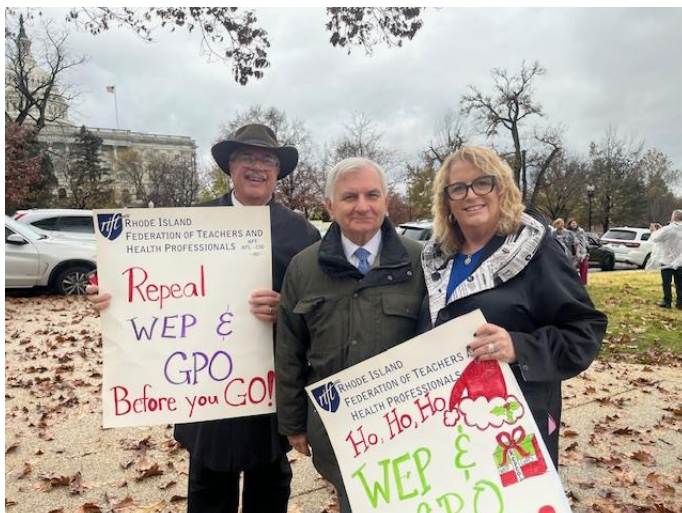
The RIFTHP endorsed 13 individuals running for the Senate in the November 5 General Election. All 13 candidates won, including four individuals (Lori Urso, Andrew Dimitri, Todd Patalano and Peter Appollonio) who are new to the RI General Assembly. The RIFTHP endorsed 18 candidates for the RI House of Representatives. Three newcomers (Maria Bucci, James McElroy and Kelsey Coletta) did not win their elections. The remaining fifteen endorsed candidates won, including Earl Reed who ran for the first time for an open seat.

The General Assembly will consist of 38 Senators, 34 Democrats and 4 Republicans. The House consists of 75 members, 64 Democrats, 1 Independent and 10 Republicans.

WEP/GPO Repealed

On Sunday, January 5, 2025, President Joseph Biden signed the Social Security Fairness Act into law. H.R. 82 passed the US Senate by a 76-20 vote on December 21, 2024. It passed the US House of Representatives on a 327-75 vote on November 12, 2024. All Rhode Island Senators and Representatives supported the bill.

RIFTHP President Maribeth Calabro and Field Representative Jim Parisi went to Washington DC on December 11 to attend a rally organized by public sector unions calling on the Senate to vote on the bill. AFT President Randi Weingarten and RI Senator Jack Reed spoke at the rally. It was at that rally that Majority Leader Schumer announced that the Senate would vote on the bill later in the month.



RIFTHP Field Rep. James Parisi, US Senator Jack Reed, RIFTHP President Maribeth Calabro

The Act, which had the strong support of the RIFTHP and the AFT, benefits workers who receive government pensions and are not covered by Social Security by repealing the Government Pension Offset (GPO) and the Windfall Elimination Provision (WEP) provisions of the federal Social Security Law. The Act is retroactive to restore benefits reduced and paid in 2024.

GPO - The Social Security amendments of 1977 (P.L. 95-216) include an offset provision to reduce the Social Security spouse's benefit of workers who receive a federal, state, or local pension based on earnings from non-covered government employment. The Government Pension Offset (GPO) applies to a spouse's / widow's Social Security benefit for any month the spouse receives a pension based upon his or her own government employment not covered under Social Security.

WEP - The Social Security Amendments of 1983 (P.L. 98-21) include a provision that reduces the Primary Insurance Amount (PIA) for a wage earner who is entitled to Social Security retirement or disability benefits and a pension based in whole or in part on their own earnings from employment not covered by Social Security. The Windfall Elimination Provision (WEP) reduced benefits significantly based on a formula

The RIFTHP represents teachers in five school districts (Coventry, Cranston, Johnston Lincoln and Central Falls) that do not participate in Social Security and thus faced a reduction in social security benefits because of WEP and GPO. About half of Rhode Island teachers do not participate in Social Security. Last year, approximately 3 million retirees across the US have had their own Social Security benefits or spousal/widow benefits reduced because of the WEP and GPO. All of the impacted individuals retired from public sector jobs such as teachers, firefighters, police and state workers.

After the bill became law, RIFTHP President Calabro said “After 40 years of fighting for the repeal of both WEP and GPO, union workers have finally realized a win! This win shows the importance of fighting for members, the strength of our solidarity and the importance of all unions joining forces to make this happen. We are grateful to all of the members in the House and the Senate for taking this stand and fighting to restore this benefit.”

Smith Hill Report Distribution

The Smith Hill Report will be published weekly and will include links to bill testimony, bill text, and other documents that are part of the legislative process. The RIFTHP wants information on our legislative work to be distributed as widely as possible. Please share this newsletter with other AFT members or anyone who has an interest in our issues.



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