



RE: Testimony in support of BILL H7612 – Termination of service to persons who are disabled, seriously ill, or in arrears of payment

Dear Chair Solomon and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in **support of House bill 7612 with suggested revisions**. By strengthening protections that delay or prevent termination of service for people facing hardship or health risks, this bill helps ensure survivors are not forced into dangerous choices, like returning to an abusive partner or living without essential utilities while trying to rebuild their lives.

For 50 years, Sojourner House, a non-profit based in Providence but now providing services across the state, has served thousands of victims and survivors of domestic abuse, sexual violence, and human trafficking. We offer wraparound services such as support groups, emergency shelter, transitional and permanent supportive housing, sexual health advocacy, and emotional support. We believe that everyone deserves a safe, healthy home, and proudly house all genders.

House bill 7612 expands protection for Rhode Island residents from the termination of public utilities from 3 weeks to 3 months when an illness duration is not specified by a physician. We support H7612 with the following recommendations with domestic violence survivors in mind. **First, we recommend explicitly including in the definition of “seriously ill,” “significant mental health disorders, challenges, and disruptions.” Second, we recommend explicitly including other health professionals to those that can certify conditions that qualify for these protections other than just physicians which can severely limit the impact of this bill.** Specifically, the lowest income Rhode Islanders may have difficulty accessing physicians to certify an illness. We suggest including mental health professionals, licensed clinical social workers, and more to the list of people qualified to certify illness for these protections.

People who have experienced domestic violence are disproportionately women from lower-income backgrounds and have also been economically victimized at a rate of nearly 100%.^{i,ii,iii,iv,v,vi,vii,viii} Economic victimization can include things like purposefully damaging a person’s credit, failing to make payments on bills that person’s name is on, and more. Additionally, survivors of domestic violence face significant negative mental health repercussions including post-traumatic stress disorder and depression affecting between 54%-75% of survivors.^{ix} If survivors have managed to be granted protections from abusers (e.g., restraining or protective orders), it is essential that policy ensuring basic needs like electricity and heat to those in these vulnerable situations are equally protected. Further, because the majority of those who’ve experienced domestic violence come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, it is essential to expand the recognition of authorities authorized to provide documentation for an illness or disability to ensure equitable access to these protections for people who may not have access or easy access to physicians. We recommend expanding those authorized to include any physical or mental health professional.

On behalf of Sojourner House, we respectfully urge you to **SUPPORT** House bill 7612 **AND MAKE THE SUGGESTED AMENDMENTS** to help ensure the most vulnerable Rhode Islanders can benefit from these protections.

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- ⁱ Ahmadabadi, Z., Najman, J. M., Williams, G. M., & Clavarino, A. M. (2020). Income, gender, and forms of intimate partner violence. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 35(23-24), 5500-5525. <https://doi.org/10.1177/088626051771954160.3.1.59>
- ⁱⁱ Bonomi, A. E., Trabert, B., Anderson, M. L., Kernic, M. A., & Holt, V. L. (2014). Intimate partner violence and neighborhood income: A longitudinal analysis. *Violence Against Women*, 20(1), 42-58. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801213520580>
- ⁱⁱⁱ Community Housing Network (2023, October 30). Domestic violence survivors face a silent crisis due to lack of affordable housing. [https://communityhousingnetwork.org/domestic-violence-survivors-face-a-silent-crisis-due-to-lack-of-affordable-housing/#:~:text=For%20every%20100%20extremely%20low%2Dincome%20renter%20households%2C,the%20National%20Low%20Income%20Housing%20Coalition%20\(NLIHC\)](https://communityhousingnetwork.org/domestic-violence-survivors-face-a-silent-crisis-due-to-lack-of-affordable-housing/#:~:text=For%20every%20100%20extremely%20low%2Dincome%20renter%20households%2C,the%20National%20Low%20Income%20Housing%20Coalition%20(NLIHC))
- ^{iv} Huecker, M. R., King, K. C., Jordan, G. A., & Smock, W. (2023). Domestic violence. *Statpearls*. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK499891/>
- ^v Iyengar, R. & Sabik, L. (2009). The dangerous shortage of domestic violence services. *Health Affairs*, 28(6), w1052-w1065. <https://doi.org/10.1377/hlthaff.28.6.w1052>
- ^{vi} World Health Organization (2024, March 25). Violence against women. <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/violence-against-women>
- ^{vii} Fanning, P. (n.d.). Recognizing financial abuse: A growing weapon in intimate partner violence. University of Maryland School of Social Work. <https://www.ssw.umaryland.edu/fall-2024-connections/alumni-and-faculty-making-an-impact-in-ipv/recognizing-financial-abuse-a-growing-weapon-in-intimate-partner-violence-#:~:text=Two%20frequently%20cited%20studies%20of,78%20percent%20reported%20employment%20sabotage>
- ^{viii} National Network to End Domestic Violence (n.d.). About financial abuse. <https://nnedv.org/content/about-financial-abuse/#:~:text=Research%20indicates%20that%20financial%20abuse,returning%20to%20an%20abusive%20partner>
- ^{ix} Nathanson, A. M., Shorey, R. C., Tirone, V., Rhatigan, D. L. (2012). The prevalence of mental health disorder in a community sample of female victims of intimate partner violence. *Partner Abuse*, 3(1), 59-75. <https://doi.org/10.1891/1946-6560.3.1.59>