



RE: Testimony in support of BILL H7880 – Duties of Utilities and Carriers

Dear Chair Solomon and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to write in strong support of **House Bill H7880** which seeks to create an income-sensitive, tiered subsidy program for home energy utility costs designed to help make utility bills more affordable for eligible low-income households. House Bill H7880 would establish a **tiered, income-sensitive utility subsidy program** that aligns household energy costs with ability to pay. This type of support reduces the financial burden of utilities for low-income households, including survivors of domestic violence, helping to stabilize housing, reduce the risk of disconnection or eviction, and promote long-term economic independence.

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.

Domestic violence affects a significant portion of our community and has long-term financial consequences for survivors. Financial abuse is present in almost all abusive relationships, and it often creates barriers that make it difficult for survivors to achieve economic independence and stable housing.^{i,ii} Survivors frequently face damaged credit, limited employment history, and deliberate financial sabotage by abusers which can restrict their access to safe, affordable housing after leaving an abusive relationship.

Access to affordable utilities is a critical component of housing stability. In Rhode Island, about **36.9% of households spend 30% or more of their income on housing costs**, including rent or mortgage and utilities, which is considered “cost-burdened.”ⁱⁱⁱ This burden means less money is available for food, healthcare, transportation, and other necessities that are essential for survivors striving to rebuild their lives.

Cost burden is especially high among low-income households.^{iv} Survivors of domestic violence are disproportionately impacted by economic insecurity as most come from low-income backgrounds and experience economic abuse.^v When utility and housing costs are high relative to income, survivors may be forced to choose between essential needs such as heat, electricity, food, and healthcare. This pressure undermines their safety and independence and can lead to housing loss, debt, or reliance on unsafe living situations.

Survivors need policies that recognize the economic dimensions of safety, not just the immediate physical protections. H7880 represents a practical, compassionate approach to easing one of the financial burdens that many survivors face, and it aligns with best practices in domestic violence advocacy that prioritize long-term stability and autonomy.

On behalf of Sojourner House, we respectfully urge you to **SUPPORT** House bill 7880 to help ensure survivors of domestic violence and human trafficking are supported in rebuilding their lives after abuse and exploitation by strengthening public safety nets in the face of exacerbated costs for basic necessities.

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- ⁱ 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>
- ⁱⁱ National Network to End Domestic Violence (n.d.). About financial abuse. <https://nnev.org/content/about-financial-abuse/#:~:text=Research%20indicates%20that%20financial%20abuse,returning%20to%20an%20abusive%20partner>
- ⁱⁱⁱ USA Facts (n.d.). How many households in Rhode Island spend too much on housing? <https://usafacts.org/answers/how-many-households-in-the-united-states-spend-too-much-on-housing/state/rhode-island/>
- ^{iv} National Low Income Housing Coalition (2026). The Gap: Rhode Island. <https://nlihc.org/gap/state/ri>
- ^v 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>