

Chris O'Brien

From: Turner, Sharon (DOC) <Sharon.Turner@doc.ri.gov>
Sent: Monday, April 21, 2025 4:10 PM
To: House Finance Committee
Subject: Probation letter of support for HB5765.

Christopher O'Brien
Committee Clerk
HouseFinance@rilegislature.gov.

Good afternoon –

I am writing in support of proposed bill H B 5765 which would add Probation and Parole Officers to the list of state law enforcement professionals for purpose of retirement contributions and benefits.

I have worked as a Probation and Parole Officer for over 30 years. Prior to this, I worked as a social caseworker for DCYF for 2 years. These two jobs are vastly different. Although there are dualities to our role in which we are expected to balance rehabilitation and public safety, I have always viewed my primary role as that of public safety. We do work with offenders towards rehabilitation, but much of our job requires us to monitor behavior and provide supervision to ensure the safety of the community. We are expected to enforce violations and take appropriate action often resulting in incarceration of the offenders under our supervision. In my 30 years with the department, I have supervised an array of offenders; I have provided intensive supervision to high-risk domestic violence offenders, leveled sex offenders, drug dealers, violent offenders (felony assaults, weapons, B&Es, murderers, gang members etc.). In my role as a parole officer, much of my caseload consisted of offenders who had served time for murder and other serious offenses. I have been threatened on the job as have been many of my colleagues. These threats are reported and investigated but are often just seen as “part of the job” and we continue to supervise our caseloads despite some of the potential dangers to our own personal safety. We work very closely with local and federal law enforcement agencies by sharing information and coordinating with each other to bring forward violations or new charges. We are required to testify in court hearings and parole hearings against our offenders whom we have filed violations on. We request warrants when our offenders have violated conditions. We are often requesting incarceration of the offender for an extended period. In addition, we are required to serve probation violations during arraignments and much of the time are asking for offenders to be held without bail. In my 30 years here, I have had multiple family members confront me in the office, in the courthouse, during home visits and in the community about my recommendations to have someone returned to prison. In addition, I had several incidents in which an offender became angry and escalated in the office almost resulting in a physical assault. We have been trained in de-escalation techniques and I credit my training for keeping me safe during those incidents. Our department has allowed us to carry Capsaicin Spray to carry in the office and on home visits, but to be approved for this, we had to undergo training which included being sprayed in the face.

Part of our duties include community supervision, requiring us to conduct home visits with offenders. While in the parole unit, my supervision area was a high-crime inner city area. On the way to a home visit on one occasion in the middle of the day, I was forced to pull over as numerous police were responding to a fatal shooting that had just occurred moments prior on the street in which I was scheduled to meet with an offender.

Many of our offenders carry weapons, are involved in gang activity, and use drugs/alcohol. Dealing with these offenders in the community substantially elevates our risk of being injured or killed. We have been fortunate in Rhode Island that there have not been any serious injuries or fatalities of probation officers as there have been in other states around the country.

In addition to the dangers inherent in our jobs, the expectations and requirements put upon us has created issues for us in other areas. Our retirement age increased under previous administrations which has resulted in an aging workforce. Many of the home visits conducted are in third or fourth floor tenements in dangerous neighborhoods. I am 60 years old and am just starting to feel my age catching up with me. The ability to climb numerous flights of stairs or be physically able to defend myself or flee to safety, if need be, diminishes with age. My reflexes, physical stamina, eyesight and my overall health is not what it was when I began this job at 30 years old. I risk injury not even related to my probation activities simply because I have numerous medical issues that I am dealing with daily.

Not only does this job take a physical toll, but there is also an emotional impact that needs to be understood. Many of us, have lost offenders to drug overdoses, murders and suicides which is never easy to process emotionally. Unfortunately, many of us have also dealt with the trauma of having one of our offenders hurt, rape or murder innocent victims while under our supervision. We read graphic police reports regularly and must interview and meet with victims as part of our duties. I have been a member of the Department of Corrections Peer Support Unit for almost 20 years and have had numerous trainings on work-related stress and its impact on our health. I am aware of the potentially devastating consequences of cumulative stress for people who have worked 20, 25 and 30+ years in this job. I have met with numerous people in my capacity as a peer supporter and understand the impact stress has on the mental and physical health of our staff.

I have a bachelor's degree in criminal justice/sociology and a master's degree in the Administration of Justice. I have attended numerous trainings throughout my career and have over 30 years of experience. Probation officers are trained professionals who interact with dangerous offenders daily just as other public safety personnel do. Although we do not have arrest powers, our jobs put us in danger physically and emotionally daily.

As mentioned, I am 30 years in and can retire in a few years. Passing of this bill and reclassifying us under public safety will not affect me as much but will greatly benefit those that are years behind me or new staff starting out in this career. I am hopeful that the General Assembly will fully understand what our job entails and agree that we deserve the same protections and benefits of other public safety personnel.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,
Sharon Turner

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