

Zara Ayanna Salmon

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Senate Judiciary Committee  
Rhode Island State House  
82 Smith Street  
Providence, RI 02903

RE: Testimony in Support of House Bill 6045

To Whom This May Concern,

I submit this testimony in strong support of House Bill 6045, which supports a 1:250 ratio of social workers in school with \$2 million in funding to support the initiative.

A December, 2024 Boston Globe article highlighted Rhode Island's mental health crisis impacting schools particularly the ones in low income communities where the ratio of social workers could be 1:800+. In 2022, 28% of youth reported having a mental, emotional, or behavioral health problem in Rhode Island. Unfortunately, 59% of children ages 3 to 17 who could have need mental health counseling, struggled to obtain that. As a person who has struggled with mental health as a youth, undergoing a failed suicide attempt at just 17, I wish this bill had been around when I was a teen. Though my high school was out of state and had a handful of social workers, I didn't have one that looked like me nor one that I felt truly cared about me. Oftentimes, social workers are severely underpaid and overworked, making their 1:1 time with students rushed. Supporting the mental wellbeing of children will lead to adults that are more confident with their abilities and know how to appropriately handle their emotions.

While House Bill 6045, attaches a one-time payment of \$2 million in it, I am also advocating for Senate bill 531 that would use cannabis taxes to fund social workers in schools in perpetuity. If passed, the Cannabis Control Commission would oversee this fund and public schools would be able to apply for this funding at a cadence that's determined by that commission. By securing dedicated funding for social workers, we ensure that those seeking to rebuild their lives have access to professional guidance, mental health services, and economic resources. These investments are not only a moral imperative but also a practical step toward reducing recidivism and fostering long-term community stability.

Both bills embody the intersection of justice and economic empowerment. They recognize that cannabis legalization must be more than a commercial venture—it must also be a vehicle for repairing past harms and reinvesting in communities; particularly the mental health of our kids. I urge the committee to pass both bills to ensure that all Rhode Island children have access to adequate mental health care, something that should be a right but exorbitant fees make it a privilege.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Zara Ayanna Salmon

Pawtucket, RI