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May 21, 2025

To: The Honorable Members of the House Finance Committee
From: Denise Panichas, Ex. Director
Subject: Letter in support of 25H-5776

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this letter in favor of 25H-5776, an act in support of safety barriers on our bridges over Narragansett Bay. We thank Representative Solomon for his leadership and the support of all the legislators in the House and Senate who have not given up trying to end suicides from the Jamestown, Pell, Mount Hope and Sakonnet bridges.

The loss of 19 lives during the pandemic—and more before and since—are not just statistics; those losses represent wounds every member of this legislature and the communities they represent know all too well.

The 2025 legislative session **must** be the turning point. The time for hesitation has long passed.

The consulting engineers' studies currently support the installation of barriers on the Jamestown and Sakonnet Bridges while rejecting them for the Pell and Mount Hope Bridges. However, in my world, "no" is not an acceptable answer when lives are at stake.

In reviewing these studies, I found no discussion of the legislative intent to save lives—an essential guiding principle that should shape infrastructure decisions. Furthermore, I found no effort to encourage Rhode Island to embrace a world-class leadership role, leveraging the state's esteemed design community to explore groundbreaking solutions in new designs and materials.

Perhaps most critically, in my conversations with 911 and local first responders—those closest to the realities of suicides from these bridges—there was no indication their input had been sought. Their firsthand experience could provide invaluable perspectives on whether alternative options exist and how the proposed measures align with the actual needs of the suicidal and those on the front lines of crisis response.

Rhode Island has the opportunity to lead, innovate, and most importantly, save lives. The effort must not end here. Momentum forward often collides with bureaucracy, but that doesn't mean lifesaving action has to wait. The key is leveraging urgency, adaptability, and existing systems to implement interim measures while pushing for permanent solutions. How do we take decisive action now?

1. We can collaborate with first responders to implement cost-effective temporary measures, similar to those used in construction. Given that first responders are mandated to provide input on all permitted construction sites, their expertise should be leveraged to ensure these measures are effectively deployed.

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With the collaboration of first responders, we can install temporary barriers. Temporary barriers are already proven as lifesaving on the Sunshine Skyway Bridge, where temporary barriers provided protection and mitigation during the construction of permanent suicide prevention infrastructure.

Rhode Island can adopt this approach, using temporary solutions to save lives now while working toward long-term protective measures for our bridges.

2. As proposed in 25H-5776, we can require suicide prevention barriers on an newly bridges with a deck height of over one hundred feet.

We propose this language be amended to create a new act that defines legislative intent and expands opportunities for creative, cost-effective, data driven solutions for new bridge construction.

Please see attached.

Every life lost to suicide is a tragedy that leaves behind families, friends, and communities forever changed. We carry their memory with us, never forgetting their names, their stories, and the heartbreak of their absence. But remembrance alone is not enough—action is required.

We have the power, the knowledge, and the responsibility to implement safeguards that prevent further loss. By committing to bridge barriers, Rhode Island can turn grief into purpose and ensure that no more lives are taken when prevention is possible. The time to act is now.

Cc: Joseph Tavares, SAMSRI Board President
Bryan Ganley, SAMSRI Board Member
Board of Directors, SAMSRI

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**THE SAMARITANS OF RHODE ISLAND
PROPOSED BRIDGE SUICIDE PREVENTION BARRIER LEGISLATION
May 21, 2025**

Legislative Intent

The General Assembly recognizes, with the state's leadership role in **health, public health, and the design and engineering community**, an opportunity to be a **national and international leader** in preventing falls and deaths—both intentional and unintentional—including suicide attempts and completed suicides from the Rhode Island's bridges.

The General Assembly also recognizes that certain bridges in our state present an **increased risk of fatal and nonfatal falls**, whether due to suicide attempts, suicide, accidental slips, or other unintended or intended incidents. These incidents **endanger individuals, emergency responders, and the broader public**, leading to **preventable injuries, trauma, and loss of life**.

This legislation ensures that **if suicide prevention barriers and safety netting are proactively integrated** into newly constructed bridges across Rhode Island, we have an opportunity to **safeguard human life, reduce trauma exposure for first responders, families, and communities, and create safer public infrastructure**.

Through **mandated safety measures and comprehensive statewide data tracking**, this Act seeks to:

1. **Prevent avoidable loss of life and serious injury** by establishing physical deterrents that reduce both intentional and unintentional falls at high-risk locations.
2. **Protect first responders and emergency personnel**, who frequently face **traumatic interventions and physical danger** while assisting individuals on bridges.
3. **Reduce risks to motorists and pedestrians**, ensuring safer bridge environments by limiting hazards associated with falls and emergency response actions.
4. **Ensure data-driven and creative decision-making** through **mandatory statewide reporting** of falls, suicide attempts, fatalities, and interventions across **all bridges—new and existing—to identify comparative trends and inform prevention strategies**.
5. **Strengthen public health and infrastructure coordination**, ensuring **state agencies including historic preservation, municipalities, acute care hospital emergency medical professionals, state and municipal public safety officials and our colleges and universities** collaborate on **effective, creative, leadership-driven preventative measures**.

The legislature further acknowledges that **bridge safety is both a public health and transportation concern**, requiring **creative, proactive engineering solutions** alongside **responsive emergency protocols**. The policies outlined in this Act aim to **protect lives**,

mitigate trauma, and promote smarter infrastructure planning, ensuring Rhode Island's bridges serve as **safe passageways for all**.

SECTION 1. Suicide Prevention Infrastructure for Newly Constructed Bridges

(a) Any newly constructed bridge within the state shall be required to incorporate suicide prevention safety measures, including but not limited to physical barriers or safety netting, if the bridge meets one or more of the following criteria:

1. The bridge has a **deck height of one hundred feet (100') or greater** above the surface below.
 2. The bridge has **documented incidents of suicide attempts or interventions**, as reported by law enforcement agencies, emergency responders, or public health officials.
 3. The bridge is the **New Washington Bridge**, identified as the site of **public falls, accidents, injuries, suicide attempts, and suicides**.
 4. The bridge has been designated as a **location of heightened suicide risk** based on incident reports and public safety assessments.
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SECTION 2. Review and Implementation Process

(a) The Rhode Island Department of Transportation (**RIDOT**) and the Rhode Island Turnpike and Bridge Authority (**RITBA**), in consultation with the **Department of Health and state and municipal public safety officials**, shall **establish a standardized process** for identifying and reviewing bridges that meet the criteria outlined in **Section 1** within **six months of passage of this Act** and shall conduct **ongoing annual reviews thereafter**.

(b) RIDOT and RITBA shall develop and implement protocols to ensure all applicable bridges **incorporate mandated suicide prevention infrastructure** in accordance with but not limited to **best practices, public safety recommendations, and creative solutions**.

(c) RIDOT and RITBA shall **demonstrate consultation with Rhode Island's historic preservation and design community**, including its **colleges and universities**, for **innovative, cost-effective solutions to address the intent of this legislation**.

SECTION 3. Expanded Reporting and Data Collection

(a) RIDOT and RITBA shall ensure all newly constructed bridges under their jurisdiction comply with the suicide prevention safety measures outlined in **Legislative Intent** and this Act.

(b) RIDOT and RITBA, in consultation with the **Department of Health and public safety officials**, shall integrate **suicide prevention barriers or netting** into applicable bridge designs as part of standard engineering and safety protocols.

(c) RIDOT and RITBA shall **collect and report statewide incident data** related to **suicide attempts, interventions, fatalities, and both fatal and non-fatal injuries from falls** occurring on **all bridges**, whether newly constructed or existing. This data shall include:

1. **Suicide attempts, fatalities, and injuries resulting from falls across all bridges statewide**, as documented by the **RI Department of Health, RIDOT, RITBA, state and municipal first responders, and acute care hospital emergency rooms**.
2. **Incident reports from state and municipal law enforcement, emergency responders, and public health officials**, including **data from acute care hospital emergency medical treatment** provided to individuals involved in bridge-related incidents.
3. **Data on falls, suicides, suicide attempts, and injuries sustained** from state-owned bridges, as reported by **acute care hospitals in collaboration with the RI Department of Health**.
4. A **comparative analysis of completed suicides, suicide attempts, and fall-related incidents** across newly constructed and existing bridges, **identifying trends, effectiveness, and the need for physical suicide prevention measures**.

(d) RIDOT and RITBA shall submit an **annual report** to the legislature that includes:

1. A **comprehensive review of bridges identified under Section 1 and all bridges under its purview**.
2. The **status of compliance** with required safety measures.
3. **Analysis of statewide comparative data**, including **incident patterns** from both new and existing bridges.
4. **Recommendations for additional reporting and physical infrastructure improvements** to enhance **injury and suicide prevention measures** for high-risk bridges, as envisioned through **Legislative Intent**.

SECTION 4. Effective Date

This Act shall take effect upon passage.