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May 21, 2025

Representative Marvin L. Abney
Chairman
House Finance Committee
State House
82 Smith St.
Providence, RI 02908

RE: H5776: RELATING TO HIGHWAYS –
RHODE ISLAND TURNPIKE AND BRIDGE AUTHORITY
Safety Barriers on Bridges

Dear Chairman Abney and members of the Committee:

I am writing on behalf of the Rhode Island Psychological Association to urge you to support H5776. This legislation will direct the Rhode Island Turnpike and Bridge Authority to design, contract and install safety barriers on our major bridges. These barriers will protect members of our community at the most vulnerable time in their lives. As psychologists we regularly work with people struggling with suicidal ideation. We seek to help our patients safely navigate their predicament, recover and have a better life experience in the future. From much experience we are keenly aware of the resources that are available to help people who are experiencing suicidal ideation as well as the vulnerabilities in our community and healthcare services that put people at greater risk of potential harm.

While many people will experience suicidal ideation at some time in their life, less than a third of people experiencing suicidal thoughts will act on them.¹ The decision to act is often made quickly and impulsively.² Having easy access to lethal means increases the

¹ Nock MK, et al. Cross-national prevalence and risk factors for suicidal ideation, plans and attempts. *Br J Psychiatry*. 2008 Feb;192(2):98-105. doi: 10.1192/bjp.bp.107.040113. PMID: 18245022; PMCID: PMC2259024.

<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC2259024/#:~:text=The%20estimated%20lifetime%20prevalence%20%28SE,a%20plan%20%28Table%20b%29>.

² HareguT, et al., The rate of transition to a suicide attempt among people with suicidal thoughts in the general population: A systematic review,

Journal of Affective Disorders, Volume 331, 2023, Pages 57-63,

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S016503272300410X>

risk of an active attempt resulting in injury or death. While we cannot protect people from all lethal means, as a community we can do things that reduce opportunities and offer protection. Rhode Island does that with our Firearm Safe Storage Law (RIGL 11-47-60.1)³ and BHLINK's "988" Suicide and Crisis Lifeline⁴. Adding safety barriers to our major bridges would be another action that would help to protect Rhode Islanders and save lives. We urge the members of the committee to support this legislation.

Overall suicide by jumping off bridges accounts for a small percentage of completed attempts but is one of the most lethal methods. However, in communities with easy access to tall bridges such as Rhode Island this rate is much higher. These "high risk" locations become imbedded in the local culture and a draw to people who are experiencing suicidal ideation. Between 2021 and 2023 there were 19 completed suicide attempts from Rhode Island bridges.⁵

There is strong evidence that erecting suicide barriers in these high-risk locations is an effective intervention that reduces the number of attempts and completed suicides. Merlio and Constanza's 2024 article *Effectiveness of physical barriers to prevent suicide by jumping from high-risk bridges: From an integrative review to a northern Italian province's paradigm* reviews the impact of these barriers on attempts and completed acts.⁶

Since I started graduate school in 1979, patients with suicidal ideation have been a constant part of my practice with children and adults. For some of these people their experience of suicidal ideation was brief, and some of these people had good support systems and the resources to help them safely navigate their crisis. However there have been many people who did not have support or resources, and some of them have had chronic and persistent suicidal ideation. It is not appropriate or even possible to intervene with every at-risk patient in ways that would ensure that they could not possibly act in a self-destructive way. I have had countless anxious days and nights working with these patients helping them to stay safe and refrain from acting on their self-destructive impulses. Some of these patients have expressed thoughts of jumping from bridges. I have had one experience where a patient was identified and restrained by officers of the Newport Police Department on the Pell Bridge. By fortune the officers happened to be in the right place at the right time to identify the patient in time to intervene. The outcome could have been different. Safety barriers would provide constant protection.

³ <https://webserver.rilegislature.gov/Statutes/TITLE11/11-47/11-47-60.1.htm>

⁴ <https://www.bhlink.org/988>

⁵ HatchC., Bill sponsors think 2024 may be the year for funding suicide prevention barriers on two Newport County bridges, January 18, 2024, https://thepublicsradio.org/newport-bureau/bill-sponsors-think-2024-may-be-the-year-for-funding-suicide-prevention-barriers-on-two-newport-county-bridges/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

⁶ Roberto Merli, Alessandra Costanza,

Effectiveness of physical barriers to prevent suicide by jumping from high-risk bridges: From an integrative review to a northern Italian province's paradigm, Preventive Medicine Reports, Volume 42, 2024, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2211335524001608>



It is indeed helpful to our patients and to those of us caring for them when we have community-based strategies that support protecting people at the most vulnerable time of their lives. Community based programs such as the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline and our Firearm Safety Law are such interventions. Safety barriers for our major bridges would be an additional intervention that will help to save lives.

We extend our appreciation to Representatives Soloman and Donovan, and Senator DiPalma for championing this effort, and to all the sponsors for their support. Please vote to support this bill. Thank you.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Peter M Oppenheimer PhD'. The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Peter M. Oppenheimer, Ph.D.
Director of Professional Affairs

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