



CITY OF NEWPORT
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Newport City Council

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Chairman Abney and members of the committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in strong support of House Bill H5776.

I currently serve on the Newport City Council and have also had the honor of serving as Mayor of Newport. In both capacities, I've come to know not only the spirit and resilience of our community, but also the heart-wrenching toll that suicide takes on individuals, families, and our city at large. I know that both the State House family has also felt that pain in recent years.

House Bill H5776 is a critical step forward in preventing suicides. By requiring the Rhode Island Turnpike and Bridge Authority (RITBA) to design and install suicide deterrent systems (such as safety barriers or netting) on the Claiborne Pell Bridge, the Mount Hope Bridge, and the Jamestown Verrazzano Bridge, the Bill directly addresses a long-standing public health and safety issue.

These bridges—particularly the Pell—have unfortunately become known in our region as sites of suicide attempts. And while that's a hard truth to acknowledge, it's one we can no longer afford to ignore.

The community cost of these incidents is immeasurable. Each life lost is a tragedy felt not just by family and friends, but by the wider community. First responders, recreational boaters, and even bystanders are often left traumatized. We see the ripple effects across schools, workplaces, and places of worship.

But beyond the emotional cost, there is a significant and recurring financial burden that falls squarely on municipal and state resources. Every suicide or suicide attempt from these bridges typically initiates a multi-agency emergency response, involving:

- Local police and fire departments, and municipal marine units,
- Harbormasters and the Rhode Island State Police,
- The United States Coast Guard, including often helicopter and boat deployment, and
- Follow-up services such as grief counseling and mental health support for witnesses and responders.

These operations are expensive, often costing tens of thousands of dollars per incident, and those are taxpayer dollars. Beyond that, repeated trauma among our responders contributes to burnout, post-traumatic stress, and retention challenges in departments already under strain.

Which brings me to a key point: the cost of these suicides should not be borne solely by local communities or the State's general fund.

The bridges in question, particularly the Pell Bridge, are toll-funded infrastructure. As such, they have a unique and appropriate mechanism to recoup costs and fund safety improvements directly through toll revenue – a resource not available for other preventative measures like 988. This is not only fiscally responsible, it is morally justified.

If a bridge is known to be a site of repeated suicide attempts, and if we know that deterrent systems have proven effective elsewhere in reducing such tragedies, then failure to act is a failure of both policy and duty of care. Other states and municipalities, including San Francisco, New York City, and Washington, D.C., have made this investment, and have saved lives as a result.

By passing H5776, Rhode Island can lead by example. We can:

- Protect vulnerable individuals before they reach a crisis point,
- Reduce the trauma and cost of repeated emergency responses, and
- Provide funding through a mechanism—toll revenue—that fairly allocates the financial responsibility to the infrastructure that bears the risk, leaving precious general fund dollars for other ways to have impact.

I urge you to pass this legislation not just as a public health and safety measure, but as a commonsense, compassionate, and cost-conscious policy. Let us not wait for more lives to be lost or more communities to grieve before we act.

Thank you for your time, your service, and your commitment to the well-being of Rhode Islanders.

Respectfully,

Xay Khamsyvoravong