



RE: Testimony in support of House Bills 7455 & 7456- The Education Equity and Property Tax Relief Act

Dear Chair Abney and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to write in strong support of **House Bills 7455 and 7456** which seek to strengthen the presence and accessibility of school social workers in Rhode Island. This type of support serves an essential role among students and families in our community. Further, systemic and equitable support that is intertwined within our state education is foundational for ensuring the safety of everyone.

For 50 years, Sojourner House, a non-profit based in Providence but now providing services across the state, has served thousands of victims and survivors of domestic abuse, sexual violence, and human trafficking. We offer wraparound services such as support groups, emergency shelter, transitional and permanent supportive housing, sexual health advocacy, and emotional support. We believe that everyone deserves a safe, healthy home, and proudly house all genders.

School social workers are often the first trained professionals to identify signs of trauma, including exposure to domestic and family violence. National research shows that children exposed to domestic violence are significantly more likely to experience anxiety, depression, behavioral challenges, and disruptions in academic performance.ⁱ These impacts can manifest in chronic absenteeism, difficulty concentrating, and increased risk of school disengagement. School social workers are uniquely trained to intervene early to provide crisis support, safety planning, counseling, and connections to community-based services like those offered by organizations such as Sojourner House.

A growing body of research demonstrates that access to school social workers improves student outcomes. Studies of large U.S. school districts have found that increased access to school social workers is associated with higher graduation rates, reduced dropout rates, and improved attendance.^{ii,iii,iv} Additionally, schools with adequate social work staffing report fewer behavioral incidents and more positive school climates.^{iv,v} **The National Association of Social Workers recommends a ratio of one school social worker per 250 students; however, many districts, including those in Rhode Island, fall far short of this standard, limiting students' access to critical support.**^v

For students experiencing domestic violence at home, school may be the only consistent and safe environment where they can access help. Without sufficient staffing, these students may go unidentified and unsupported. Early intervention reduces the long-term social and economic costs associated with untreated trauma, including involvement with the child welfare system, homelessness, and continued cycles of violence.^{vi,vii} There must be intentional and equitable decisions about staffing school social workers so that all students regardless of zip code have access to these essential services.

On behalf of Sojourner House, we respectfully urge you to SUPPORT House Bills 7455 and 7456. Investing in school social workers strengthens our public safety net, supports student success, and helps build safer, healthier communities across Rhode Island.

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- ⁱ Cage, J., Kobulsky, J. M., McKinney, S. J., Holmes, M. R., Berg, K. A., Bender, A. E., & Kemmerer, A. (2022). The effect of exposure to intimate partner violence on children's academic functioning: A systematic review of the literature. *Journal of Family Violence, 37*, 1337-1352. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10896-021-00314-0>
- ⁱⁱ Alvarez, M. E., Bye, L., Bryant, R., Mumm, A. M. (2013). School social workers and educational outcomes. *Children & Schools, 35*(4), 234-243. <https://doi.org/10.1093/cs/cdt019>
- ⁱⁱⁱ Kelly, M. S., Frey, A., Thompson, A., Klemp, H., Alvarez, M., & Berzin, S. C. (2010). Assessing the national school social work practice model: Findings from the second national school social work survey. *Children & Schools, 32*(1), 5-12. <https://doi.org/10.1093/sw/swv044>
- ^{iv} Kelly, M. S., Berzin, S. C., Frey, A., Alvarez, M., Shaffer, G., & O'Brien, K. (2015). The state of school social work: Findings from the national school social work survey. *School Mental Health, 7*, 262-273. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12310-010-9034-5>
- ^v National Association of Social Workers (NASW) (2012). NASW practice standards for school social workers. <https://www.socialworkers.org/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=eLUS2JLweG8%3D&tabid=4355&portalid=0&mid=19311>
- ^{vi} Centers for Disease Control (CDC) (8 Oct, 2024). Preventing adverse childhood experiences. <https://www.cdc.gov/aces/prevention/index.html>
- ^{vii} Majebi, N. L., Adelodun, M. O., Anyanwu, E. C. (2024). Early childhood and behavioral disorders: The role of healthcare access in breaking the cycle. *Comprehensive Research and Reviews in Science and Technology, 2*(1), 80-90. <https://doi.org/10.57219/crrst.2024.2.1.0034>