

Good afternoon members of the House Finance Committee,

My name is Andrea Gonzalez Sanchez. I am here in strong support of Bill H7456, which would provide funding to increase the number of Social Workers in public schools across Rhode Island. I am a Program Manager at Young Voices, a Crisis Counselor at a Suicide Prevention Hotline, and just recently graduated with my BSW.

At 15 years old, my life was saved by my school social worker, Nikki Bond. I am grateful to sit here in front of you as a survivor, because sadly many young people in Rhode Island aren't alive today to tell their stories. Their needs went unnoticed for too long; they never got to meet their Nikki. This may come as a surprise to people, but many schools do not have a designated Social Worker in there daily. These professionals are dividing their time between multiple schools, and might only be available on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Students don't get to choose the days that they are in crisis, so if they are struggling with suicidal thoughts on Wednesday, who will be there for them? If we are serious about addressing the mental health crisis in our schools, then no death to suicide should be acceptable, no matter the day.

In these past years working alongside youth as an educator and a crisis counselor, I have witnessed a tremendous increase in their mental health needs. Youth have told me that they feel hopeless, that they have no one to turn to, that they've been left behind and forgotten. In those moments I do my best to provide them with support, but I know that my reach can only extend so far. We need a vast array of Social Workers that can meet youth emotionally where they are, wherever they are, whenever they are. Social Workers are essential to preserving and improving the lives of students. They are advocates, therapists, and resource coordinators. We need them on the frontlines, to make sure no youth ever has to feel that despair again.

Today, you have a future Social Worker in front of you, one of the hundreds that support this bill and have been advocating for it. There is no lack of will from mental health professionals to see this work done in schools. We recognize it, and the students demand it. Social workers save lives, and so will you by voting yes on this bill. Please allocate the resources that are necessary to sustain more social workers in our schools by passing H7456.

Thank you for your time

Andrea Gonzalez Sanchez