

To the Honorable **Chairman Marvin L. Abney** and Members of the House Finance Committee:

My name is Melissa Ames. I am a Rhode Island resident and the **Advocacy Committee Policy Chair** for the Rhode Island Chapter of the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention. I am writing in strong support of **H 8148**.

This bill is deeply personal to me. As I have shared with this committee, I lost my dear friend Johnnie to suicide in 2015. In Rhode Island, we lose one neighbor to suicide every three days—roughly **105 lives lost annually** across our state. While these numbers are devastating, they represent a public health crisis that we have the power to address through proactive safety infrastructure.

The bridge-related tragedies we see in the Ocean State are a significant part of this larger crisis. Between 2018 and June 2022, there were **23 known suicides** from the four bridges maintained by the Rhode Island Turnpike and Bridge Authority (RITBA). More recently, from 2021 to 2023, at least **19 lives were lost** at these locations. These figures represent friends, parents, and children whose loss has left a permanent hole in the fabric of our community.

High bridge barriers and safety netting provide the one thing a person in a mental health crisis needs most: **time**. Research indicates that when a crisis is interrupted by a physical barrier, the overwhelming majority of people do not go on to die by suicide. In fact, a landmark study showed that **94% of individuals** who were prevented from using a bridge in a moment of crisis survived long-term. By installing these protections, we create a vital window for intervention, allowing for connection to life-saving resources like the 988 Lifeline.

H 8148 takes a responsible, structured approach. It directs the RITBA to design barriers or netting for the Mount Hope, Claiborne Pell, Sakonnet River, and Jamestown Verrazzano bridges, with a clear deadline for design submission by January 1, 2027. It ensures that our infrastructure reflects our commitment to protecting the lives of every Rhode Islander.

Supporting H 8148 is a concrete step this committee can take to treat bridge safety as the urgent public health issue it is. This legislation ensures that current and future high bridges in our state serve as symbols of connection, not of loss.

Thank you for your time and for your commitment to the safety of all Rhode Islanders.

Sincerely,

Melissa Ames

Advocacy Committee Policy Chair

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, Rhode Island Chapter