



RE: Testimony in support of House Bill 7320—The Rhode Island Works Program

Dear Chair Abney and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in **support of House Bill 7320**, which seeks to remove the child support cooperation requirement in order to qualify for the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP). Instead, this would become voluntary rather than a requirement for all individuals.

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 are concerned about the child support cooperation requirement for a number of reasons. First, the requirement requires paternity establishment. While there are exemptions for those who have experienced domestic violence, the waiver still poses potential risk to these individuals by requiring documentation of abuse. Second, there are reasons why a parent may not want to establish a child support order, especially with an abusive or formally abusive partner. Third, the process is an extra administration burden on survivors who are trying to get themselves and their children on their path to economic freedom.

H7320 is critical for survivors of domestic violence who disproportionately come from low-income backgrounds and have experienced economic abuse.^{i,ii,iii} Many survivors face damaged credit, limited savings, and urgent financial needs when trying to secure safety and independency.^s Supporting this, at Sojourner House in 2025, 91% of our clients came from low or extremely low backgrounds (less than 30% of the area median income, AMI; or 30-50% of the AMI) and nearly 50% have experienced economic abuse although this number is likely underreported.

Requiring people to establish paternity in order to qualify for these essential services aimed at helping the most vulnerable Rhode Islanders meet their basic needs puts survivors at risk in a multitude of ways. Research shows that the period when a survivor attempts to leave an abusive partner is the most dangerous, with a significantly increased risk of violence or homicide by the abuser.^{iv,v} Abusers often escalate threats, stalking, or physical attacks to regain control during separation.^{vi,vii,viii} In these situations, it is crucial that survivors have the ability to financially rebuild their lives outside of abusive relationships without having to rely on an abusive ex-partner to access resources.

Research shows that women (and other marginalized gender groups) are disproportionately more likely to experience domestic violence.^{ix} Further, about half of our clients in 2025 were parents and of those parents, nearly half reported being homeless at intake highlighting the often dire economic condition that people endure to escape abuse. **The requirement of requiring child support cooperation is an outdated, sexist and classist policy that disproportionately puts the most economically vulnerable survivors of domestic violence at risk.** Access to the child care support is essential to ensuring survivors can maintain economic independence without feeling pressured to return to an unsafe situation.

H7320 moves Rhode Island toward a system that prioritizes safety, ensuring that the right to access state resources are not dependent on policies that prioritize monetary gains for the state over the safety of its residents. **For these reasons, we respectfully urge the committee to support House Bill 7320.**

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- ⁱ Fanning, P. (n.d.). Recognizing financial abuse: A growing weapon in intimate partner violence. University of Maryland School of Social Work. <https://www.ssw.umaryland.edu/fall-2024-connections/alumni-and-faculty-making-an-impact-in-ipv/recognizing-financial-abuse-a-growing-weapon-in-intimate-partner-violence/>
- ⁱⁱ National Network to End Domestic Violence (n.d.). About financial abuse. <https://nnedv.org/content/about-financial-abuse/>
- ⁱⁱⁱ Bonomi, A. E., Trabert, B., Anderson, M. L., Kernic, M. A., & Holt, V. L. (2014). Intimate partner violence and neighborhood income: A longitudinal analysis. *Violence Against Women*, 20(1), 42-58. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801213520580>
- ^{iv} Campbell, J. C., Webster, D., Koziol-McLain, J., Block, C., Campbell, D., Curry, M. A., Gary, F., Glass, N., McFarlane, J., Sachs, C., Sharps, P., Ulrich, Y., Wilt, S. A., Manganello, J., Schollenberger, J., Frye, V., & Loughton, K. (2003). Risk factors for femicide in abusive relationships: Results from a multisite case control study. In *Domestic Violence* (pp. 135-143).
- ^v Davies, L., Ford-Gilboe, M., & Hammerton, J. (2009). Gender inequality and patterns of abuse post leaving. *Journal of Family Violence*, 24, 27-39. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10896-008-9204-5>
- ^{vi} Mayock, P. & Neary, F. (2025). "Where am I going to go tonight? Where am I literally going to go?": Exploring the dynamics of domestic violence and family homelessness. *Journal of Family Violence*, 40, 987-1002. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10896-023-00667-8>
- ^{vii} Hardesty, J. L., Raffaelli, M., Khaw, L., Mitchell, E. T., Haselschwerdt, M. L., & Crossman, K., A. (2012). An integrative theoretical model of intimate partner violence, coparenting after separation, and maternal and child well-being. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, 4, 318-331. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1756-2589.2012.00139.x>
- ^{viii} Spearman, K. J., Hardesty, J. L., & Campbell, J. (2022). Post-separation abuse: A concept analysis. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 79, 1225-1246. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jan.15310>
- ^{ix} Ahmadabadi, Z., Najman, J. M., Williams, G. M., & Clavarino, A. M. (2020). Income, gender, and forms of intimate partner violence. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 35(23-24), 5500-5525. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260517719541>