

Chair Marvin L. Abney
House Finance Committee
Rhode Island State House

May 14, 2026



RE: Testimony in support of House Bill 8156 – Domestic Violence Prevention Act

Dear Chair Abney and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to write in strong support of **House Bill 8156** which seeks to create a domestic and sexual violence state fund to support survivors in Rhode Island. We thank Representative Tanzi for putting in this essential piece of legislation.

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.

Rhode Island has an opportunity through H8156 to make a long-overdue investment in survivor services that reflects both the scale of need in our state and the proven cost benefits of prevention and intervention.

Domestic violence and sexual assault services are core public health and public safety infrastructure. These programs do more than respond to crisis. They reduce long-term harm, stabilize families, and interrupt cycles of violence. The vast majority of domestic violence survivors are caregivers of young children, meaning these interventions also help protect and support the next generation.

The cost of intimate partner violence is staggering. Estimates routinely exceed \$100,000 per victim when accounting for medical care, mental health services, lost wages, housing instability, and justice system involvement. By contrast, investment in survivor services is significantly more cost-effective and reduces these downstream public expenditures. Strengthening these programs is not only the right thing to do but is the fiscally responsible thing to do.

Rhode Island should also be guided by what other states are already doing. Many states, including neighboring Massachusetts and Connecticut, provide consistent state-level funding for domestic violence and sexual assault services. Rhode Island currently relies heavily on unstable and insufficient funding streams, leaving critical programs vulnerable to gaps that disrupt services and limit capacity. H8156 would bring Rhode Island in line with regional best practice by establishing a more stable and predictable state investment in survivor services.

The need for these services in Rhode Island is urgent and ongoing. Rhode Island continues to experience some of the highest rates of domestic violence in New England, while providers report increasing demand for shelter, advocacy, counseling, and legal support. At the same time, service providers are operating under sustained strain, making it difficult to meet current need, let alone expand prevention and early intervention efforts that could reduce future harm.

H8156 also gives the General Assembly an important opportunity to determine how Rhode Island prioritizes settlement or dedicated public funds in a way that directly benefits public safety and community well-being.

Investing these resources in domestic violence and sexual assault services ensures that they are used in a way that is transparent, accountable, and directly tied to reducing harm in our communities.

This is an investment in safety, stability, and long-term cost reduction. It strengthens families, reduces pressure on emergency systems, and helps ensure that survivors can access services when they need them most. For these reasons, I respectfully urge the committee to support H8156 and establish a stable state funding source for domestic violence and sexual assault survivor services in Rhode Island.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Vanessa Volz". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "V" and a stylized "V" at the end.

Vanessa Volz , Esq.

Sojourner House, President and CEO

Rhode Island Domestic & Sexual Violence Services Fund

House Bill 8156

The Urgency of this Fund

Domestic and sexual violence (DV/SV) are widespread and increasing in Rhode Island, yet too many survivors still go without the support they desperately need.

Our state remains one of the few without a permanent budget line for DV & SA services, leaving life-saving programs underfunded and inconsistent. Creative solutions are essential to fill this gap.

By creating a dedicated fund for domestic and sexual violence services, legislators would have the ability to vote to prioritize these essential programs and decide where settlement funds go –providing stable, reliable support for survivors across our state.



Establish the DV & SA Services Fund

This bill would create a domestic & sexual violence fund administered by the state's Victims of Crime (VOCA) administrator

Create a Revenue Stream for Survivors

Startup: \$1 million from the state's general revenue.

Continued support: 10% of all state settlement funds up to \$5 million per settlement will be allocated to this fund.

Philanthropic donations can also be deposited into this fund.



Creates an Advisory Committee for Granting Awards

Creates an advisory group that will be responsible for determining grant awards. Eligible grantees include nonprofits whose missions are to reduce domestic violence and/or sexual assault.

The grant administrator will be responsible for publishing an annual report on the program.

Support the Fund, Support Survivors

Contact your legislators today and urge them to support the Domestic & Sexual Violence Services Fund

Who are my representatives?

