

Personal Testimony

My name is Joanne Wingert, and I was employed as a registered nurse at Brown Health (formerly Lifespan/Newport Hospital). In July 2021, I was informed of the vaccine mandate at Newport Hospital, which required all employees to be vaccinated against COVID-19. While the hospital offered medical and religious exemptions on paper, the reality was that no such exemptions were ever accepted for any employees across any of its facilities.

Due to my strongly held medical and religious beliefs, I could not comply with the mandate. As a result, in October 2021, I was terminated from my position, losing not only my job but also my salary, career, and essential health and dental benefits. This decision was not only unjust but also violated my right to make personal medical decisions based on my beliefs and health needs.

I am in full support of passing H5856, which directly addresses the hardship I and many others have faced. This bill ensures that no person or entity can impose vaccination, testing, or mask mandates without offering exemptions based on personal belief, medical reasons, religious convictions, immunity, periodic testing, or the use of employer-provided personal protective equipment. If this legislation had been in place in 2021, I would not have been forced out of my career for standing by my convictions.

H5856 is crucial because it enforces accountability. It prohibits employers, including healthcare institutions, from stripping away the rights of employees under the guise of public health measures without providing legitimate exemptions. Furthermore, it allows individuals to file complaints with the attorney general if exemptions are improperly denied or if termination occurs due to non-compliance with a mandate. Employers who violate these protections would face substantial financial penalties, ensuring that they respect the rights of their employees.

The passage of H5856 is not just about rectifying past injustices; it is about preventing future harm. No one should have to choose between their career and their deeply held medical or religious beliefs. By enacting this legislation, Rhode Island would affirm the fundamental rights of its citizens to make informed decisions regarding their own health without fear of discrimination or economic retaliation.

I urge lawmakers to support and pass H5856 to protect individuals like myself who have already suffered under these mandates and to ensure that no one else has to endure the same injustice in the future.