



RHODE ISLAND INTERSCHOLASTIC LEAGUE

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Good afternoon, everyone. My name is Michael Lunney, and I serve as the Executive Director of the Rhode Island Interscholastic League, which governs interscholastic athletics for high schools and middle schools across our state.

I am here today on behalf of the RIIL and our member schools to express our strong support for House Bill 7549, which seeks to enhance penalties for individuals who assault sports officials.

Across Rhode Island, our schools host thousands of athletic events each year. These events are well-supervised, and we work closely with school administrators, athletic directors, event supervisors, and local law enforcement to help ensure a safe environment for all participants. Many schools now have security or police officers present at games precisely because we recognize the growing challenges around spectator behavior and our shared responsibility to maintain order and safety.

While those steps help minimize incidents at the school level, the significance of this legislation lies in the strong message it sends statewide, across both interscholastic AND non-school-related sports at all levels. The bill's definition of a "sports official" is especially important — it includes not only referees and umpires, but also administrators, athletic directors, supervisors, league officials and anyone else who are present and authorized to enforce or uphold the rules and safety of an athletic event. This broad definition recognizes the reality that these individuals often find themselves in situations where emotions run high and must make decisions that can spark confrontation.

Unfortunately, assaults and intimidation toward officials have become more common nationally, as well as here in Rhode Island. We've seen an alarming rise in harassment that discourages good people from officiating and from working at athletic events. The result is an officials' shortage that threatens the future of organized sports at every level, especially interscholastic athletics.

Key statistics and findings from a survey collected by the National Association of Sports Officials (NASO) of approximately 36,000 officials nationwide regarding officials abuse:

- **Fear for Safety:** the survey data showed that roughly 48% of male officials and 45% of female officials reported feeling unsafe or fearing for their safety.
- **High Levels of Verbal Abuse:** Studies indicate up to 87% of officials have suffered verbal abuse, with 13% reporting physical assault.
- **Abuser Profile:** Abusive behavior is largely driven by parents and spectators, leading to a crisis in retention.
- **Impact on Retention:** Poor spectator behavior is the primary driver behind the decline in the number of officials, with many quitting within their first two years.
- **Physical Incidents:** Reports show an increase in physical violence against referees, sometimes resulting in serious injury.

House Bill 7549 takes an important stand against this trend. By strengthening penalties for assaulting a sports official — whether at a school, community, or youth league event — the General Assembly would help make it clear that this behavior will not be tolerated. The inclusion of restitution and counseling requirements also ensures accountability while fostering the kind of corrective action that aligns with our educational mission.

On behalf of our governing body, the Principals Committee on Athletics and our 141-member high schools and middle schools, the RILL supports this bill to help Protect the people that are essential in preserving both the integrity and safety of sports in Rhode Island.

Thank you for your time and for your ongoing commitment to safeguarding the values of respect and sportsmanship across all levels of competition.