



March 4th, 2026
Written Testimony for Public Hearing
House Judiciary Committee
Re: Testimony in support of House Bill 7198

Chairwoman McEntee and committee members,

My name is Emily Gaudreau, and I am the Director of Community Advocacy and Engagement at the Jewish Alliance of Greater Rhode Island.

The Jewish Alliance of Greater Rhode Island strongly supports House Bill 7198.

“You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” — Exodus 22:20.

“The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens; you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” — Leviticus 19:34.

These teachings are foundational to Jewish values. Our tradition teaches that the Torah commands us to care for and protect the stranger 36 times—more than any other commandment. That repetition is not accidental. It reflects how central this obligation is to Jewish identity and moral responsibility.

The story of the immigrant—the migrant, the refugee, the member of the diaspora—is a quintessential part of the Jewish American experience. We are, after all, a diasporic people. In 1939, the SS *St. Louis* was turned away, carrying more than 900 Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi Germany. Many were later murdered in the Holocaust. My own family fled Ukraine and Russia during the pogroms of the early 20th century. My great-grandmother survived only by hiding under a bed while much of her village was slaughtered. She eventually made it to Brooklyn, New York, where she faced antisemitism and anti-immigrant hatred. That was nearly 100 years ago. Yet here we are in 2026, once again witnessing rising hatred and anti-immigrant sentiment.

The Jewish Alliance of Greater Rhode Island is the broadest consensus voice of the Jewish community. We work to improve the lives of the 20,000 Jews in Rhode Island and the broader Rhode Island community. We turn Jewish values into concrete action. Among those values are *Tikkun Olam*—the responsibility to repair the world—and *Hineni*—the call to stand up and say, “Here I am,” so that no one stands alone. These values compel us to support this bill and to stand with our immigrant neighbors. At a time when violence, bias, and prejudice are at alarming levels—when our neighbors are targeted because of the color of their skin, how they speak, or where they are from—it is more important than ever to ensure that minor contact with the criminal legal system does not trigger life-altering immigration consequences.



Under federal immigration law, certain minor convictions punishable by a year or more in prison can lead to detention, denial of critical immigration relief, and deportation. A sentence of 365 days—even for a misdemeanor—can carry devastating consequences. House Bill 7198 addresses this issue in a simple and measured way. By making a one-day change in the definition of a misdemeanor, the bill would allow judges to impose sentences of up to 364 days instead of 365, thereby protecting hundreds of Rhode Islanders from unnecessarily harsh immigration penalties tied to minor offenses.

Importantly, this bill does not eliminate judicial discretion. Judges would still be able to impose appropriate sentences. The legislation simply ensures that minor misconduct does not automatically place someone on a path toward detention or deportation.

Passing this bill would help protect vulnerable members of our immigrant community, including asylum seekers and survivors of domestic violence, who might otherwise be barred from immigration relief because of a misdemeanor conviction. States such as New York, Washington, and Nevada have adopted similar reforms to protect their residents from disproportionate immigration consequences.

House Bill 7198 reflects our state's commitment to fairness, proportionality, and basic human dignity. I respectfully urge the Committee to approve this legislation and protect Rhode Island's immigrant community from the harsh and unintended consequences of federal immigration law.

Sincerely,
Emily Gaudreau
Director, Community Advocacy and Engagement