



Memo To: House Judiciary Committee
From: Kelly Nevins, Chief Executive Officer
Date: March 9, 2026
Concerns: **SUPPORTS H7206 – Causes of Action**

Women's Fund of Rhode Island invests in women and girls through research, advocacy, grantmaking, and strategic partnerships designed to achieve gender equity through systemic change. Central to our mission is the belief that everyone deserves to live, work, and thrive in communities free from violence, exploitation, discrimination, and fear.

House Bill 7206 supports this vision by offering meaningful legal protections to individuals who speak out about sexual assault, harassment, and discrimination.

Across the country, survivors and victims who share their experiences are increasingly threatened with, or sued for, defamation. Even when these cases lack merit, the lawsuits themselves can be devastating. Defending against a defamation claim can cost tens or even hundreds of thousands of dollars, forcing many people into silence rather than risking financial ruin or further trauma.

H7206 addresses this problem in a balanced and thoughtful way. The bill provides an **affirmative defense to defamation claims when an individual communicates factual information about their experience of sexual assault, harassment, or discrimination, provided the communication was made without malice or gross negligence.**

This is an important protection because current law leaves a gap. Rhode Island's existing Anti-SLAPP protections focus primarily on statements made in the context of government proceedings, leaving many survivors vulnerable when they speak outside formal legal settings, whether to warn others, seek support, or advocate for change.

Importantly, H7206 does not protect malicious or knowingly false accusations. Instead, it protects individuals who speak in good faith about their own experiences. The bill also allows a prevailing defendant to recover attorneys' fees and damages if they are improperly sued for defamation based on such communications, helping deter lawsuits intended primarily to intimidate or silence victims.

The bill further recognizes an important reality: many victims never file formal complaints because of fear of retaliation, career consequences, housing instability, or lack of trust in institutional systems. By clarifying that protections apply when a person had a reasonable basis to file a complaint, whether they ultimately filed one or not, H7206 acknowledges the lived experiences of many survivors.

As an organization committed to systemic change, we support this legislation because silence allows harassment, discrimination, and violence to continue unchecked. When people are able

to speak safely about misconduct, workplaces, housing environments, schools, and communities become more accountable and more just.

This bill sends a clear message that Rhode Island supports individuals who report harm in good faith and will not allow the legal system to be used as a tool of intimidation. We respectfully urge the committee to pass H7206.

About Women's Fund of Rhode Island

For over 25 years, Women's Fund of Rhode Island has worked to build a Rhode Island where everyone has the opportunity to thrive. We advance gender equity through research, policy advocacy, leadership training, and community investment. Our work has informed major legislative victories, including paid family leave expansion, fair pay protections, and equitable access to reproductive health care. We have trained thousands of leaders and invested over \$1.5 million in local organizations driving change. Learn more at www.wfri.org.