



House Judiciary Committee
State of Rhode Island
82 Smith Street
Providence, RI 02903

March 9, 2026

RE: In Support for House Bill 7206

Dear Chairwoman McEntee and Members of the House Judiciary Committee:

The National Woman's Law Center Action Fund and nine other undersigned organizations are united in our support of House Bill 7206, the Speak Your Truth Act.

H.7206 is urgently needed because sexual assault is widely prevalent, yet vastly underreported. More than 200,000 women in Rhode Island will become victims of sexual violence in their lifetime.¹ However, reporting rates for sexual assault are only 2% in high school,² 10-12% in college,³ and about 6-13% in the workplace.⁴ One of the biggest reasons survivors stay silent is fear of retaliation.⁵

Rapists and abusers are weaponizing retaliatory defamation lawsuits against their victims. Despite the incidence of false reporting being remarkably low,⁶ a 2021 study found that 23% of student survivors were threatened with a defamation suit by their assailant, and 19% were warned by their school of the possibility of a defamation suit.⁷ A 2020 report found that being sued for defamation is the third most common form of workplace retaliation reported by survivors.⁸ Even though assailants do not typically expect to win, meritless defamation lawsuits still cost \$21,000 to \$55,000 to defeat and can easily soar above \$100,000 or \$1,000,000.⁹ Moreover, these lawsuits force survivors to disclose intensely private details and to repeatedly relive their trauma through invasive discovery and other litigation demands. These expensive and traumatizing lawsuits often coerce victims into silence.

¹ Ctrs. for Disease Control & Prevention, *National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey: 2016/2017 State Report 25* (Dec. 2023), <https://bit.ly/3CDYv7a>.

² Kayla Patrick & Neena Chaudhry, NWLC, *Let Her Learn: Stopping School Pushout for Girls Who Have Suffered Harassment and Sexual Violence 2* (2017), <https://bit.ly/3wD6Vs4>.

³ David Cantor *et al.*, *Report on the AAU Campus Climate Survey on Sexual Assault and Misconduct*, Westat, A7-27, A7-30 (revised Jan. 17, 2020), <https://bit.ly/3TBTQwE>.

⁴ *Select Task Force on the Study of Harassment in the Workplace*, EEOC, II.C (June 2016), <https://bit.ly/4cgcDc8l>.

⁵ *Female Victims of Sexual Violence, 1994–2010*, Dep't of Justice - Bureau of Justice Stats., 7 (revised May 31, 2016), <https://bit.ly/3IRTyXV>.

⁶ In one of the largest and most methodologically rigorous studies on false reports, researchers found that police relied on these types of biases to classify 8% of 2,643 reports of sexual assault as "false," whereas researchers concluded the actual rate of false reports was only 2.5%. Kimberly A. Lonsway *et al.*, *False Reports: Moving Beyond the Issue to Successfully Investigate and Prosecute Non-stranger Sexual Assault 3* (2009), <https://bit.ly/4kEaEsX>. See also David Lisak *et al.*, *False allegations of sexual assault: An analysis of ten years of reported cases*, 16 *Violence Against Women* 1318-1334 (2010), doi:10.1177/1077801210387747.

⁷ See, e.g., Sarah Nesbitt & Sage Carson, Know Your IX, *The Cost of Reporting: Perpetrator Retaliation, Institutional Betrayal, and Student Survivor Pushout 21* (2021), <https://bit.ly/4ga86AS>.

⁸ Jasmine Tucker & Jennifer Mondino, NWLC, *Coming Forward: Key Trends and Data from the TIME'S UP Legal Defense Fund 13* (2020), <https://bit.ly/4abJog7>.

⁹ See, e.g., David Keating, *Estimating the Cost of Fighting a SLAPP in a State with No Anti-SLAPP Law*, Inst. For Free Speech (June 16, 2022), <https://bit.ly/3IDCPqU>.

Rhode Island’s current anti-SLAPP law does not sufficiently protect survivors. Rhode Island’s anti-SLAPP law only protects statements made in a government proceeding, about an issue being considered by a government proceeding, or about an issue of “public concern.”¹⁰ It does not adequately protect survivors from retaliatory defamation suits because many survivors disclose their assaults outside of a government proceeding (including in person and online) and because many courts have wrongly held that sexual assault is a purely *private* issue rather than an issue of “public concern.”

H.7206 closes the gap by providing two essential protections for Rhode Islanders:

1. **Protecting survivors.** H.7206 explicitly ensures that those speaking out about sexual assault, harassment, or other discrimination are not silenced by frivolous lawsuits, as long as their statements are made in good faith (“without malice or gross negligence”).
2. **Protecting the falsely accused.** H.7206 allows those who are falsely accused of sexual assault, harassment, or other discrimination to pursue meritorious defamation lawsuits when they can establish that the accusations against them were made in bad faith (with “malice or gross negligence”).

Rhode Island should pass H.7206. In the 2026 legislative session, there are already nine active Speak Your Truth bills in other states, with additional bills expected in the next few months as part of this national wave embracing these crucial protections for survivors.¹¹ Moreover, California, Connecticut, Maine, New York, Oregon, Tennessee, Vermont, Virginia, and Washington State have all successfully passed similar laws in recent years to explicitly protect survivors from being targeted by defamation and other abusive lawsuits.¹²

It’s time for Rhode Island to join them.

Respectfully submitted,

National Women’s Law Center Action Fund

Joined by:

Day One
Legal Momentum
Lift Our Voices
Rhode Island Coalition Against Domestic Violence
Rhode Island State Council of Churches
Sojourner House
UltraViolet Action
Women’s Fund of RI
The Womxn Project

¹⁰ R.I. Gen. Laws § 9-33-2(e).

¹¹ See, e.g., H.B. 911, 158th Gen. Assemb. (Ga. 2026); S.B. 117 & H.B. 148, 33rd Gen. Assemb. (Haw. 2026); H.1974 & S.1143 194th Gen. Ct. (Mass. 2026); S.B. 295 & H.465, 448th Gen. Assemb. (Md. 2026); S2852 & A4857, 222nd Leg. Sess. (N.J. 2026); H.B. 580, 169th Gen. Ct. (N.H. 2026); A.687 & S.2419, 249th Reg. Sess. (N.Y. 2026); H.B. 107, 2026 Gen. Assemb. (Vt. 2026); H.B. 713, 209th Gen. Assemb. (Pa. 2026).

¹² See, e.g., Cal. Civ. Code § 47.1 (2023) (creating a privilege for statements made without malice about sexual assault, harassment, or discrimination); HB 7134, 2025 Gen. Assemb., Reg. Sess. (Conn. 2025) (amending anti-SLAPP law to protect written statements made without malice about a crime or act of discrimination under state’s human rights act from civil liability) (eff. Oct. 1, 2025); LD 385, 132nd Leg., 1st Special Sess. (Me. 2025) (amending anti-SLAPP law to protect statements made without malice about sexual assault, sexual harassment, or discrimination from civil liability) (awaiting governor’s signature); N.Y. Civ. Rights Law §§ 70-a, 76-a (extending anti-SLAPP protections to include survivors); S.B. 180, 83rd Leg. Assemb. (Or. 2025) (amending anti-SLAPP law to protect statements made without malice about sexual assault from defamation liability) (eff. Jan. 1, 2026); H.B. 1888, 163d Gen. Assemb., Reg. Sess. (Va. 2025) (amending anti-SLAPP law to protect statements made in a Title IX hearing at an institution of higher education from civil liability) (eff. July 1, 2025); Vt. Stat. Ann. § 1181 et seq. (2023) (allowing survivors to request a court order restricting abusive litigation); Wash. Rev. Code Ann. § 26.51.010 et seq. (2020) (same); Tenn. Code Ann. § 29-41-101 et seq. (2018) (same).