



**RE: Testimony in support of H7648 and H7653, Sexual Assault & Domestic Violence Reporting**

Dear Chair McEntee and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in **strong support of House Bills 7648 and 7653** which would implement electronic filing for police reports of domestic violence and sexual assault while also adding new reporting requirements including language barriers in each and the propensity for felony charges in domestic violence incidents.

For 50 years, Sojourner House, a non-profit based in Providence but now providing services across the state, has served thousands of victims and survivors of domestic abuse, sexual violence, and human trafficking. We offer wraparound services such as support groups, emergency shelter, transitional and permanent supportive housing, sexual health advocacy, and emotional support. We believe that everyone deserves a safe, healthy home, and proudly house all genders.

**Electronic filing of these reports will increase reporting consistency and ensure that law enforcement agencies have timely access to critical information about incidents of abuse.** Currently, paper-based reporting can result in delays, missing documentation, or inconsistent record-keeping. Transitioning to an electronic system provides better security for sensitive documentation, including photos, evidence, and victim statements, which is essential to protect survivors' privacy and safety.

Both H7648 and H7653 also add important notations to police reports regarding language barriers. Including language barriers in police files ensures that the needs of survivors who speak languages other than English are recognized, allowing law enforcement to provide appropriate interpretation and access to services. **Language barriers often prevent survivors from reporting abuse, accessing services, and timely intervention.<sup>i,ii</sup> Further, differences in language needs can lead to misunderstandings, incomplete evidence, and delays in legal proceedings all of which can compromise survivor safety.<sup>iii</sup>**

In H7653, which focuses on police reports for domestic violence, adding a "felony enhancement" notation for these cases enable officers and prosecutors to recognize patterns of escalating abuse and respond appropriately, increasing survivor safety and improving legal outcomes. Electronic filing can expedite the legal process, which can be critical in situations where survivors are at risk. **Research demonstrates that delays in documenting and responding to domestic violence incidents increase the likelihood of repeat victimization and escalation to severe injury or homicide.<sup>iv,v</sup>** Timely access to accurate, secure records allows prosecutors and courts to act more quickly, improving risk assessment and safety planning, and ensuring that perpetrators are held accountable before abuse escalates further.<sup>vi</sup> Studies have shown that when law enforcement has immediate access to prior incident reports, including felony enhancement indicators, it enhances their ability to identify patterns of escalating violence, intervene earlier, and reduce harm to survivors.<sup>vii</sup>

It is with this body of research and our experience as a sexual assault and domestic violence agency that we strongly **support H7648 and H7653** and urge the Committee to advance these bills, which will strengthen Rhode Island's response to domestic violence and sexual assault and improve outcomes for survivors.

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<sup>i</sup> Raj, A., & Silverman, J. G. (2002). Immigrant South Asian women and intimate partner violence: Factors associated with disclosure to police and use of services. *Violence Against Women, 8*(6), 742–771.

<sup>ii</sup> Menjívar, C., & Salcido, O. (2002). Immigrant women and domestic violence: Common experiences in different countries. *Gender & Society, 16*(6), 898–920.

<sup>iii</sup> Bent-Goodley, T. B. (2007). Culture and domestic violence: The role of professional and cultural competence. *Journal of Social Work Education, 43*(2), 267–286.

<sup>iv</sup> Campbell, J. C. (2004). “Danger Assessment” and risk factors for intimate partner homicide. *National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, CDC*.

<sup>v</sup> Zeoli, A. M., et al. (2013). *Risk factors for intimate partner homicide in the context of prior domestic violence*. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse, 14*(4), 225–238.

<sup>vi</sup> Logan, T. K., Walker, R., & Cole, J. (2010). Improving criminal justice responses to domestic violence: Lessons from research on risk assessment and repeat victimization. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 25*(5), 907–928.

<sup>vii</sup> Zeoli, A. M., & Crowley, J. (2010). Risk assessment tools and repeat victimization in intimate partner violence. *Violence and Victims, 25*(5), 642–658.