

Testimony in Opposition to H7128

We are writing today in opposition to H7128 on behalf of the RIC/AFT Local 1819, the union of full-time faculty at Rhode Island College. We greatly value the members of our campus safety and security team and all they do every day for our community. However, we are opposed to taking legislative steps that increase the potential for violence and decrease the accountability of these officers, especially at the current moment given the intrusions of ICE and expanding surveillance from the federal government.

We understand that the increased push for this legislation comes in response to several incidents in our state in which lives were tragically lost due to mass shooters. However, we argue that armed police are not the answer. The Brown campus police were armed, as were the Pawtucket police, and the fact that these officers had firearms on their persons did not protect individuals in either case. At Brown, the shooter had fled before police arrived, and in Pawtucket, the shooter was already deceased at the time police entered the building. Indeed, about half of mass shootings end before law enforcement is even on the sceneⁱ.

Evidence from cases such as the Pawtucket shooting and the recent shooting in Bondi Beach show that far more effective than waiting for armed police to arrive is having people on site who are able to effectively disarm shooters, something that can be done by hand and with no weapons. Yet training on disarming shooters is rarely part of the safety toolkit. It is also worth pointing out the importance of what scholar Jane Jacobs calls “eyes on the street”—the idea that our communities are safer when we know and trust one another. Indeed, the Brown shooting was solved through evidence provided by one such set of eyes on the street, known to all of us as John.

Today, many students and employees at Rhode Island College are unlikely to serve as eyes on the street because we are scared. Our students are especially scared: scared for their futures, scared for their families, scared for the foundation of basic rights they had been raised to believe our country stood for. They come to college seeking a better life. While mass shootings are certainly terrifying, members of our community face far more routine dangers from intimate partner violence and from ICE enforcement. Armed police do not protect us from those threats; they increase our fear, fear exacerbated every time a Rhode Islander is arrested by ICE or detained by officers cooperating with ICE. Research shows that police use of force is one of the leading causes of death among young men of colorⁱⁱ. Furthermore, police are more likely to perceive young Black men as threatening, even when those young men have done nothing wrongⁱⁱⁱ. As RIC’s student body has become more diverse, the implications of this risk become more profound. Students should not have to fear for their lives when walking to class, and arming the campus police would mean increasing that fear. Because of all of these fears, members of our community have become even less likely to think of a call to the police, campus or otherwise, as a solution.

It is worth noting that arming the campus police would be exceedingly expensive. Costs for arming the campus police include, but are not limited to, weapons and ammunition, appropriate storage, and initial and ongoing training. These costs would be in the hundreds of thousands of dollars just to get started, not including ongoing costs and the increased liability costs. The resources that would be spent arming the campus police could be more effectively used in building a community that is safe for all of us. Reductions in violence, including mass shootings, are more likely to be accomplished by reducing access to firearms and increasing access to mental health services. Effective mass-shooting response training, including in the skills needed

to disarm a shooter, would provide people not only with the tools necessary to reduce death tolls but also with a sense of self-efficacy rather than profound fear.

H7128 would also provide campus safety officers with employment protections that go far beyond what protections other employees, like our colleagues on the faculty, are afforded. At this moment in time, when education is under unprecedented attack from our federal government and from reactionary activists, it sends a terrible message to the people of the State of Rhode Island and to our educators and students to suggest that the employees who have the authority to detain members of our community deserve more due process than the employees who are charged with carrying out our core mission of educating Rhode Islanders for Rhode Island's future. We are not, of course, opposed to increased due process protections for all employees—for example, my colleagues on the faculty would greatly appreciate the ability to select members of the committees that hear discipline against us, to have influence on who serves as hearing officers, to have reasonable limitations on suspension from duty, and to receive other protections in line with those provided for under the Law Enforcement Officers' Bill of Rights.

Unlike the case at URI, RIC lies close to active police precincts and substations where armed police are available. There are three police stations or substations within roughly two miles of the Rhode Island College campus; at URI, there is only one police station within five miles of campus. Thus, any needed response for armed officers can quickly be deployed to RIC.

Therefore, we respectfully urge you not to support H7128. However well-intentioned this proposal is, it would not make our campus a safer place. Given the complexity of responding to active-shooter events, arming police is not a solution to the possibility of mass shootings^{iv}. Rather, it would increase the risk to our students' lives and make it harder for us to do the job of educating them, both because of the fact that it would reduce funding available for our core mission and because students who are living in fear are far less able to learn. We commend the sponsors for their interest in the safety of our students, and would ask instead that they support increased funding for mental health care for all Rhode Islanders, as such measures are likely to go far further in enhancing public safety both in the community at large and on our campus.

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ⁱ https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/1043986219840237?casa_token=X87jUA-1O4UAAAAA:yc-LV-IpC9XoBTg95Z9tvoBp_15UlaaGMUbK1ohmV8OICb-WV4Jp_SN_GEmqGUo5Qob1hytNNsB7aA

ⁱⁱ <https://osf.io/hw9d2/download>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://contexts.org/articles/black-lives-and-police-tactics-matter/>

^{iv} <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2024/03/parkland-shooter-scot-peterson-coward-broward/677170/>