



March 24, 2026

The Honorable Chairwoman Carol Hagan McEntee
Honorable Members of House Committee on Judiciary
House Lounge
State House
Providence, RI 02903
RE: H7546 - An Act Relating to Criminal Procedures, Arrest

Good afternoon Chair and Members of the Committee,

My name is Beth Bixby, and I am the CEO of Tides Family Services. We serve children and families across Rhode Island in the areas of behavioral health, juvenile justice, and child welfare.

I appreciate the intent behind H7546 and the desire to support staff working in challenging environments. However, I am writing to express concerns regarding the provision that expands the definition of “peace officer” to include juvenile program workers and shift coordinators within the Department of Children, Youth and Families (DCYF) .

This proposal represents a significant policy shift that warrants careful consideration.

At its core, Rhode Island’s juvenile system—particularly programs such as the Rhode Island Training School (RITS)—is designed to be rehabilitative and therapeutic, not custodial. Expanding “peace officer” status to frontline youth-serving staff risks blurring the line between care and custody, which has been a longstanding and intentional distinction in our system.

While this change may be intended to enhance safety or authority, it raises several important concerns:

- **Shift in System Identity:** Redefining juvenile program staff as peace officers moves the system closer to a correctional model, rather than a therapeutic, youth-centered approach. This is inconsistent with best practices in juvenile justice and behavioral health.
- **Impact on Youth Engagement and Outcomes:** The effectiveness of youth-serving staff depends on trust, relationship-building, and de-escalation. Assigning law enforcement authority may fundamentally alter how youth perceive staff, potentially undermining engagement and increasing escalation rather than reducing it.
- **Broader Structural Implications:**
This change may signal a broader shift in how Rhode Island approaches juvenile services—potentially moving toward a more correctional framework. If that is the intent, it should be explicitly discussed and evaluated, rather than embedded within a definitional change.

Rhode Island has made meaningful progress in advancing a system of care approach for children and youth—one that prioritizes community-based services, family engagement, and therapeutic interventions. It is critical that policy changes reinforce, rather than inadvertently undermine, that direction.



For these reasons, I respectfully recommend that the Committee:

- Further examine the implications of this proposal on system design, workforce, and youth outcomes;
- Consider whether there are alternative ways to support staff safety that do not require redefining their role as peace officers;
- Ensure alignment with the State's broader goals for juvenile justice reform and children's behavioral health.

Thank you for your consideration and for your commitment to Rhode Island's children and families.

Respectfully submitted,

Beth A. Bixby, LICSW
Chief Executive Officer
Tides Family Services