



March 24, 2026

To the Chairman and Members of House Judiciary Committee:

**I am writing to express my strong opposition for H 7550**, which would make certain activities near roadways a felony. My concerns, as described below, are about the implications of this bill for people who panhandle, as well as those who engage in other first amendment activities such as sharing information or engaging in peaceful protest.

My name is Megan Smith, and I am an outreach worker and the Experiential Education Coordinator with Rhode Island Street Medicine. Rhode Island Street Medicine affirms the worth and dignity of all individuals and believes that access to health care is a human right. Our goal is to provide accessible, high quality health care to people experiencing unsheltered homelessness in Rhode Island that promotes both personal wellness and systems transformation. I am also an Assistant Professor of Social Work at Rhode Island College. I have been doing outreach in Rhode Island for 19 years.

I have also been involved in advocacy efforts to preserve the right to peacefully panhandle at the city level, including in Providence and Cranston. Panhandling is both a way that people meet their basic needs and a way to remind society of our shortcomings in adequately providing for all residents. As a motorist, I regularly interact with people I see panhandling. These conversations are brief (almost always when I'm stopped at a red light), and I have never felt that I nor any other motorist were endangered because of that individual. I do certainly see daily threats to motorist safety, including speeding, erratic driving, and running red lights. However, none of these have anything to do with pedestrians engaged in activities near the roadway.

Similarly, I have been involved in protests that have involved providing information to motorists. At those actions, I have never witnessed any crashes or other events that could endanger drivers. Some drivers opt to engage, some ignore us entirely, but nobody is harmed. Again, as a motorist, I similarly feel that the choice to engage or not is mine when I see the person advocating for Fill the Boot, letting me know it's tax time, or sharing whatever other information. People on the side of the road are just one more factor to account for as a driver, no different than billboards, traffic signs, and often most consequentially, the behavior of other motorists.

The fact that this bill proposes to make these activities a felony with the associated threat of jail time further heightens my concerns. That someone could be incarcerated for up to three years for

a first offense (including a mandatory 60 days to serve) is egregious. The people who would be subject to this penalty are people who are engaging in peaceful activities of survival, as well as people who are engaging in nonviolent acts of information sharing, whether in the context of protest or commercial activities.

If this is truly a concern related to motorist safety, a more appropriate next step would be to study the matter. I have not heard of a crash that was precipitated by a person panhandling or protesting near a roadway. However, if this information exists, I would welcome a more focused conversation centered on these particular concerns and their solutions.

Thank you very much for your time. I appreciate the opportunity to share my perspective and would be glad to discuss this further. Please feel free to call me at (401) 484-0234 or email me at [msmith57@brownhealth.org](mailto:msmith57@brownhealth.org).

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Megan Smith". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Megan Smith, PhD MSW  
Outreach Worker & Experiential Education Coordinator  
Rhode Island Street Medicine  
Assistant Professor  
Rhode Island College School of Social Work