

Chair Carol H. McEntee
House Judiciary Committee
Rhode Island State House

March 24, 2026



RE: Testimony in support of H8058—Computer Crime

Dear Chair McEntee and Members of the Committee:

We write in support to House Bill 8058 that would make a very small but meaningful change to the criminal offenses for cyber stalking and cyber harassment in Rhode Island.

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.

Around 4 in 10 women (41%) and 1 in 4 men (22%) experienced cyber sexual harassment in their lifetimes.ⁱ

Under current law, prosecutors must prove that a communication was sent for the “sole purpose of harassing” a victim in order to secure a conviction. This standard is unusually restrictive and does not reflect how harassment actually occurs in the digital age. As a result, harmful conduct can evade accountability simply because a defendant claims an additional purpose, no matter how minor or pretextual.

Cyber harassment rarely occurs in a vacuum. Abusive messages are often mixed with other content such as attempts to intimidate, control, shame, or provoke a response.ⁱⁱ Legal practitioners note that proving intent in online communications is already challenging, and ambiguity in the statute can be used as a defense to avoid accountability.ⁱⁱⁱ By removing the word “sole,” H8058 aligns the law with real-world behavior.

Rhode Island law (§9-1-2.1) already recognizes that harassment involves conduct that would cause a reasonable person to suffer substantial emotional distress or fear of bodily injury.^{iv} Research and victim advocacy organizations confirm that cyberstalking often includes repeated messages, monitoring, impersonation, and threats which are behaviors that escalate over time and can be psychologically devastating.^v Importantly, documenting patterns of harassment such as texts, emails, and online activity is often necessary for victims to seek protection or prosecution. When the legal standard is too narrow, even well-documented abuse may not meet the threshold for enforcement.

Digital communication is now central to daily life. Harassment can occur across platforms in text, email, and social media and often blend personal, social, and threatening content in a single interaction. A law that requires harassment to be the only purpose of a message is outdated and inconsistent with how abuse manifests today. H8058 modernizes the statute without expanding it beyond its original intent. Thank you for your consideration.

ⁱ The facts behind #metoo: A national study on sexual harassment and assault. *Stop Street Harassment*. <https://www.stopstreetharassment.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Full-Report-2018-National-Study-on-Sexual-Harassment-and-Assault.pdf>

ⁱⁱ Women’s Law (30 Sept., 2024). Abuse using technology. <https://www.womenslaw.org/about-abuse/abuse-using-technology/ways-survivors-use-and-abusers-misuse-technology/cyberstalking-6#:~:text=Cyberbullying%20is%20unwanted%20and%20aggressive,or%20harassment%20laws%20may%20apply>

ⁱⁱⁱ Savage, D. G. (27 June, 2023). Supreme Court makes it harder to prosecute online stalkers. *LA Times*.
<https://www.latimes.com/politics/story/2023-06-27/supreme-court-makes-it-harder-to-prosecute-online-stalkers>

^{iv} Courts and Civil Procedure—Procedure Generally, Title 9, Ch. 1, 2.1, Civil liability for stalking (2025).
<https://webserver.rilegislature.gov/Statutes/TITLE9/9-1/9-1-2.1.htm>

^v Stevens, F., Nurse, J. R. C., & Arief, B. (2021). Cyber stalking, cyber harassment, and adult mental health: A systematic review. <https://doi.org/10.1089/cyber.2020.0253>