

Chairperson McEntee, Representative Messier, and Members of the House Judiciary Committee,

I am writing to respectfully oppose House Bill 7647, which would expand access to juvenile records for the purpose of firearm background checks.

This bill raises significant concerns regarding privacy, fairness, and the long-standing principle that the juvenile justice system is intended to focus on rehabilitation rather than lifelong consequences.

Juvenile records have historically been treated differently from adult records for a reason. The system recognizes that young individuals often make mistakes but should be given the opportunity to move forward without those actions permanently defining their future. By expanding access to juvenile records for firearm background checks, this bill risks undermining that principle by allowing past juvenile conduct to have lasting consequences well into adulthood.

Additionally, this proposal broadens the disclosure of sensitive juvenile records beyond their original intent. Even in cases where charges were dismissed, no information was filed, or the individual was found not guilty, these records could still be accessed and used in determining eligibility. This raises concerns about fairness and due process, as individuals may face consequences based on allegations rather than proven misconduct.

There is also a concern about consistency in how records are treated. If juvenile records are sealed or protected in most contexts, creating exceptions for specific purposes begins to erode the integrity of those protections. Once access is expanded in one area, it becomes easier to justify further expansions in others.

Furthermore, existing federal and state laws already establish criteria for firearm eligibility, including disqualifying offenses and due process protections. Expanding access to juvenile records risks creating additional barriers for individuals who are otherwise legally eligible, without clear evidence that such measures would improve public safety.

Rhode Island's juvenile justice system has long balanced accountability with the opportunity for rehabilitation. This bill shifts that balance in a way that may impose lasting consequences on individuals for actions taken as minors, even in cases where those matters were resolved without conviction.

For these reasons, I respectfully urge the Committee to hold House Bill 7647 for further study and not advance it to the House floor.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

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