



RE: Testimony in support of House Bill 8328, Permitting Virtual or Remote Court Hearings

Dear Chair McEntee and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of **H8328**, a bill that would **expand access to court hearings by allowing for virtual or remote attendance**.

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. We believe that everyone deserves a safe, healthy home, and proudly house all genders.

For the survivors we serve, access to the court system is often one of the most critical and most difficult steps toward safety and justice. Many face significant barriers to appearing in person, including safety concerns, trauma, transportation challenges, childcare responsibilities, employment constraints, and ongoing intimidation by perpetrators. Remote access to court proceedings would meaningfully reduce these barriers.

First and foremost, survivor safety would be significantly enhanced. Appearing in court can expose survivors to direct contact with the person who harmed them, which can be retraumatizing and, in some cases, dangerous. Remote participation allows survivors to engage in legal processes without risking their physical safety or emotional well-being.

Remote access also improves equity and accessibility. Many survivors lack reliable transportation, cannot afford to miss work, or live in areas where reaching the courthouse is difficult. Survivors of human trafficking, in particular, may face unstable housing or limited autonomy. Remote options ensure that these individuals are not excluded from participating in their own cases.

Allowing for remote proceedings can reduce delays and increase participation. This can lead to more consistent case progression and better outcomes for all parties involved. **Providing remote options reflects a trauma-informed approach to justice**. It acknowledges the realities survivors face and adapts systems to meet their needs, rather than requiring survivors to overcome unnecessary obstacles to access legal protections.

Importantly, H8328 does not eliminate in-person proceedings but it expands options and this should remain true. Researchers have outlined challenges of fully remote court proceedings for survivors of domestic violence and those challenges should not be taken lightly.^{i,ii} Rather, expanding options allows survivors to exercise autonomy over what is best for them in a particular situation.

We respectfully urge the Committee to support House Bill H8328 to increase protections and justice for survivors. Thank you for your consideration and for your commitment to the safety and well-being of Rhode Islanders.

ⁱ Johnson, M. (2022). The impact of COVID-19 on domestic violence hearings in Washington D.C.: Weighing pros and cons of virtual hearings for domestic violence survivors. Georgetown Law. <https://www.law.georgetown.edu/gender-journal/wp-content/uploads/sites/20/2022/03/M.-Johnson-The-Impact-of-COVID-19-on-DV-Hearings-.pdf>

ⁱⁱ Munro, L. B., Riel, N. M. (2020). Our virtual reality. *Family Law Quarterly*, 54(3), 245-267. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27182025>