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To: Representative Carol Hagan McEntee, Chair of the House Judiciary Committee  
Honorable Members of the House Judiciary Committee

From: Samantha DeMartin

Date: May 19, 2026

Re: **Support for House Bill 7199, RI Survivor Early Lease Termination Act**

My name is Samantha DeMartin, and I have been a proud Rhode Island resident for over twelve years. That pride was shaken last year when I found myself in a situation where I had to escape domestic violence.

Many survivors do not get to choose when they are able to leave. That window is often dictated by external factors, making the most dangerous time—leaving—also the most unpredictable. This is when a survivor needs the most support. But that support cannot be provided - by individuals, organizations, or systems—if the gaps in our laws are too cavernous.

**That is why I am here today: to share my story as a clear example of why House Bill 7199 must become law.**

I was in the second year of a lease with my partner when the abuse escalated to a dangerous level. I am significantly disabled and medically fragile. I was also recovering from major spinal cord surgery and working to regain mobility.

I immediately informed my landlords of the situation after law enforcement came to the home, knowing one of them is a detective in the state. Police and advocates strongly urged me to seek protective order and take urgent safety measures.

But leaving was not an option.

I am oxygen dependent. I rely on extensive medical equipment and daily care. I cannot drive or leave independently. I have no local family support. I also have a service dog whose life was threatened as well. I was trapped.



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My landlords initially agreed I could secure the interior doors myself changing the doorknobs to ones with locks and keys and they would change the exterior locks once I obtained a protective order. I spent an entire weekend barricaded in a bedroom with bottled water, protein bars, and my service dog, waiting for the courts to open. I'll never forget how long and terrifying that weekend felt.

I told myself: just make it to Monday. But on Monday, due to several miscommunications and clerical errors, I could not obtain the order. I was sent back to the police station, because they didn't think I was even safe for that night. Officers agreed in horror—but because both names were on the lease, they could not grant a no trespass order. They were going to have the law enforcement advocate call me immediately.

I returned home unprotected.

The law enforcement advocate immediately placed extra patrol around my home and begged me to return to court to try again. I could no longer walk from pushing my body far past its limits. The sheer terror and exhaustion I felt is impossible to articulate but will live inside of me forever.

On Tuesday, I was finally granted a temporary restraining order. It was served within minutes of my abuser returning home. While there was some instant relief, the words of the officers and the judge stating “at the end of the day this is just a piece of paper, and you need to protect yourself” rang through my head.

I sent it immediately to my landlords and asked for the locks to be changed.

Instead, I was told they would only change the locks if I signed a legal document releasing my abuser from the lease, making me solely responsible for rent, damages, and everything in the home.

I had to repeatedly refuse. The pressure for me to sign this release began to fracture what was previously a great working relationship.



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**I asked if I paid for all the lock changes if they would reconsider, knowing this order was temporary but still involved my ex-partner to vacate and remain off the property for the duration of that order.**

**They consulted with an attorney and at the end of the day were more afraid of being sued by my abuser or her family than of me dying on their property.**

At that point, every system designed to protect me from real imminent danger had done its job—law enforcement, the courts, advocates, counselors—and I was falling through the cracks in the laws. Still unaware I had even further to fall.

What should have been 21 days of a protective order turned into three orders spanning months. The orders were extended repeatedly solely due to the defendant. I remained alone in the home where I was abused, without a lock change, without consistent care, and without safety.

This is not a rare complication—it is the reality of the legal process.

The pathway to getting a permanent protective order is often not brief or clear, and having the ability to change the locks to prevent someone who has threatened your life from entering your home should be a basic right. “Just hold on for another 21 more days,” I pleaded with my nervous system each night trying to get any sleep at all, just for the goalposts to move.

Having any modicum of safety while undergoing the grueling process of the legal system during the most escalated period in the leaving process is a commonsense measure that could make all the difference.

It also will protect landlords from having to make the decision of opening themselves up to liability or risking property damage, bodily harm, or further crimes including homicide occur on their property.

Eventually, I knew I had to leave the property entirely. I had informed my landlords of this immediately after the first order was granted because of an uncovered stalking history of my ex-partner, fear for my safety, and the property was no longer accessible to me living alone.



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Then came the next barrier. They had already made it clear they wanted me to stay despite these glaring concerns.

As I am sure most people in this room are aware, **there is a housing shortage in this state, and the rental market is competitive even without the accessibility features I require. It was a very long and arduous process to find alternative housing, something I succeeded at that I will never take for granted. Each day at my old residence felt like being trapped in a cage of my abusers' design not knowing what chaos the next day would bring...or if there would even be a next day at all.**

I informed my landlords in writing I would be leaving with at least thirty days' notice of my vacating the property. I hired movers, contractors, and medical companies out of pocket to make sure I was entirely vacated, and the property was restored in a timeframe insurance wouldn't allow for.

**My landlords demanded I solely pay the remainder of the lease—approximately \$12,000.**

**Additional barriers during the most uncertain times of someone's life are not just unnecessary – they are cruel.**

At the same time, I was already facing legal fees, moving costs, medical expenses, and the complete rebuilding of my life. I was going without necessary medical care just to survive the process. The financial burden of leaving an abusive relationship is crippling, especially in situations where someone is unable due to timing or abuse to save or predict when they will be able to leave.

I didn't have \$12,000 and the messaging I was receiving from my landlords held a narrative I was doing the wrong thing, screwing them over, and that I owed them this in exchange for a good reference to get to safe housing. All would be proven to be untrue as the property was on the market for less than a month before it was rented again. The constant back and forth battle with them trying to negotiate a solution was compounding the traumatic experience.

I spent my nights researching housing laws since I could not afford another attorney. To my shock and horror discovered that legislation addressing this exact situation had been



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introduced—but not passed. The solutions to the most unnecessarily difficult parts of my journey were in front of me in black and white - yet it didn't exist.

My anger grew as I also learned that if I had lived just miles away in a neighboring state, I would have been protected. If I lived in government housing, I would have been protected. But because I lived in Rhode Island, a state I love, that I made my home, I was NOT protected. This is beyond unacceptable.

By the time I received a permanent protective order, I moved out, restored the property, and returned it in good condition. My ex-partner was also able to do the same. My landlords ultimately chose not to pursue the remaining rent after I told them they would have to follow through on suing me—but they kept my security deposit. I questioned this since at the walk through they signed a paper stating the property was in good condition with no cause for the security deposit to be withheld, went through great and expensive lengths to do so, and \$3500 is not a small sum of money.

I again was told I was the only one being unreasonable, creating problems, and ungrateful for the gift of not being sued. A narrative that runs deep both during and after leaving abusive relationships.

I want to be abundantly clear that if you are hearing this and only hear a story of uniquely villainous landlords putting profit over the wellbeing and life of their tenant - that is not the case. It is not unique and in this entire story they did not violate a single law or right of mine in their action and inaction – that is the problem.

While devastated by their personal choices, I am not unsympathetic to the fact that they also had to seek legal advice and were faced with difficult decisions. This bill doesn't just provide the lifesaving protection that all Rhode Islanders deserve during the most harrowing times of their lives, but also clarity and protection for landlords to make choices that support the survivor instead of victimizing them again.

I stand here in front of you today to plead for support for this bill not because I need it to pass right now but because I needed it to pass last year. I get the privilege of being here alive and well enough to speak to you despite our laws, not because of them.



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I made it out by the hands of fate and will spend whatever time and effort is needed to make sure Rhode Island is still the state I am proud to call home. Home requires safety, support, and security and without this legislation – we are lacking those basic protections that 41 other states already provide. I urge you to use the power you have to close those gaps in the law, so no other person can fall through them the way I did.

**No one should have to make the choice between staying with an escalating abuser, leaving the abusive relationship remaining unsafe in the house they were harmed in, or risk financial ruin, homelessness, or litigation that will follow them around for years.**

**This is an opportunity to correct the failure to pass this last year and to make Rhode Island a safer place for us all to call home. Thank you for your time and consideration of this budget neutral, commonsense, lifesaving, piece of legislation.**