

STATE OF RHODE ISLAND



Department of Corrections

Patricia A. Coyne-Fague, Esq., Director
40 Howard Avenue
Cranston, RI 02920

Tel: (401) 462-2611
Fax: (401) 462-2630

The Honorable Robert E. Craven, Esq.
House Committee on Judiciary
State House, Room 35
Providence, RI 02903

January 25, 2022

Re: H6602 – Act Relating to Public Records – Access to Public Records

Dear Chairperson Craven:

This evening the House Judiciary Committee will consider House Bill #6602. This bill would make any reports of investigations conducted by law enforcement agencies internal affairs division a public document. The Rhode Island Department of Corrections (RIDOC) continues to have serious concerns about this legislation.

Unlike our partners in law enforcement, the RIDOC provides for public safety in a confined, institutional setting. The confidentiality of the investigatory process is essential to protect inmates, staff and all members of the public who enter the ACI. Internal Affairs conducts many types of investigations, including allegations of possible misconduct by inmates, staff, contractors, volunteers, visitors, and members of the public. Many allegations prove to be unfounded; others may be referred to the State Police for criminal investigation; others may be referred for possible employee discipline. Premature disclosure of an investigation would invade the privacy of persons who are exonerated. It also would adversely affect investigations of wrongdoing by giving individuals a “heads – up” to the investigation. Lastly, it would create a chilling effect on the ability of Internal Affairs to investigate at all. If individuals know their statements are subject to public disclosure without protection or privacy, they will not come forward and/or speak the truth. Like all law enforcement agencies, the RIDOC has confidential informants who assist in investigations of drug trafficking, extortion, and staff misconduct. However, unlike other law enforcement agencies, these informants live within the walls of the ACI. Disclosure of investigatory reports would put their lives in grave danger. Many Access to Public Record Act requests at the RIDOC come from inmates incarcerated at the ACI. Disclosure of information to inmates about other inmates is extremely dangerous. Lastly, investigations are also required under federal law known as the Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA). These investigations involve complaints of a highly confidential and personal nature.

Although the bill provides for redaction of names, addresses, dates of birth and other items, that will not protect the identities of those in RIDOC investigatory reports. The very facts of an investigation in a prison setting (time, place, factual circumstances) make the identities of individuals easy to ascertain.

The result of this legislation would be to undermine the Department's ability to protect those it is charged with protecting and hold wrongdoers accountable.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this legislation.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Patricia A. Coyne-Fague', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Patricia A. Coyne-Fague, Esq.
Director

cc: Honorable Members of the House Judiciary Committee
The Honorable Representatives Ajello, Williams, Cassar, Knight, Kislak, Potter, Henries,
Speakman, Ranglin-Vassell