



Testimony | NWDL Action Rhode Island - HB 6166 - 2025 Session June 3, 2025

To: House State Government and Elections Committee
Rhode Island State Legislature

Fr: Emma Davidson Tribbs, Executive Director
National Women's Defense League

Date: June 3, 2025

Re: HB 6166 - Preventing & Addressing Sexual Harassment in the State Legislature

Chair Shanley, Vice Chairs Messier and Corvese, and Committee Members:

My name is Emma Davidson Tribbs and I am a co-founder and Executive Director of the National Women's Defense League. National Women's Defense League is a nonpartisan non-profit dedicated to preventing and addressing workplace sexual harassment. We research to understand the breadth of the problem, develop policies and best practices, and advocate for those solutions. One of our specific areas of expertise is sexual harassment in state legislative workplaces. We are here today to speak in support of House Bill 6166, with gratitude to Rep. Tanzi for her sponsorship of the legislation.

Sexual Harassment: A Prevalent Problem in State Legislatures

Sexual harassment remains underaddressed, prevalent and systemic in far too many workplaces. 38% of all women and 14% of men experience sexual harassment at work. In some industries, more than 9 in 10 women say they have been sexually harassed. This includes government workplaces.

- According to our report [*"Abuse of Power: Uncovering a Decade of Sexual Harassment in State Legislatures."*](#) there have been **at least 400 incidents of sexual harassment committed by 145 sitting lawmakers nationally since 2013**. Research indicates that actual incidents are likely at least three times as much due to underreporting by survivors and legislatures.¹

¹ National Sexual Violence Resource Center. "Ending Sexual Assault and Harassment in the Workplace." Accessed on February 6, 2025.
<https://www.nsvrc.org/ending-sexual-assault-and-harassment-workplace>

- This is not a partisan issue: Our research also shows that sexual harassment is committed by members of both political parties equally.
- In 2024, we conducted a [national survey](#) sent to every sitting state legislator in the country. Rhode Island had the third highest response rate. **Nationally, 1 in 3 state legislators said they have witnessed or experienced sexual harassment** in the statehouse—and of those, **only 60% reported it**.

The Rhode Island Statehouse is not immune to sexual harassment. In addition to our national research on prevalence, public accusations over the last decade have also demonstrated that the problem exists here in Providence. Multiple instances of sexual harassment in the legislature were brought to light during the #MeToo moment. Public comments indicated that harassment persisted for years; that leadership at the time failed to adequately address the issue; that the harassment directly interfered with effective policy making, tainted by requests for sexual favors and threats of retaliation; and that the issues were widely known about in the building.

I wish I could tell you that this was unusual in statehouse environments. It is not. Rhode Island's failure to implement meaningful reform since public accusations have been made indicates that little has likely changed, and may have even had a depressive effect on reporting, especially for those with less power, like interns, pages and early-career staff.

HB 6166: A Critical & Common Sense First Step

HB 6166 will modernize Rhode Island's approach to preventing workplace sexual harassment, bringing it in line with best practices when it comes to anti-harassment training in the workplace.

- **Require Regular Training:** The best way to create and maintain a harassment-free workplace is to prevent issues from occurring in the first place, and to ensure workers are knowledgeable on how to report it. However, currently sexual harassment training for state legislators is optional. Training completion should be required regularly and enforceable. HB 6166 requires annual training for state legislators, regular full-time and part-time temporary or contractual employees, volunteers, interns, pages and lobbyists. High-quality consistent training is efficient and preventative, and resources already exist to support training efforts, including at the Rhode Island Human Rights Commission. This is not a burdensome requirement.
- **Establish a Neutral Third Party:** Currently, sexual harassment complaints in the Rhode Island Legislature are primarily investigated and overseen by legislators themselves—a system vulnerable to conflicts of interest and political influence. Rhode Island should establish a neutral, nonpolitical reporting and enforcement channel. HB 6166 proposes a critical reform: assigning oversight and enforcement responsibilities to the Rhode Island

Ethics Commission. This shift will improve reporting, reinforce trust in the process, and reduce burdens on the legislative branch.

- **Codify the Policy:** The core components of the legislature’s sexual harassment policy should be codified in state statute, not chamber or caucus rules, to ensure transparency, consistency, and reduce political conflicts of interest, providing the strongest protection for all involved. HB 6166 does that.

Rhode Island Should be Leading

The legislature should pass and implement these commonsense reforms, following the lead of states like New York, Massachusetts, Illinois, and Maryland—all of which have adopted better systems to address and prevent workplace harassment.

Everyone in this building deserves a workplace free from sexual harassment—and the assurance that, if it occurs, it will be addressed fairly and effectively. HB 6166 is a foundational step in the right direction. The National Women’s Defense League urges you to advance this legislation.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Emma Davidson Tribbs". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long, sweeping underline that ends in a small star-like flourish.

Emma Davidson Tribbs
Executive Director