

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

Fr: Shea Holman
Assistant Professor, George Mason University
Counsel, the Purple Method

Date: June 3, 2025

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

Dear Chair Shandley, Vice Chairs Messier and Corvese, and Committee Members:

My name is Shea Holman and I write to express my support for HB 6166 and to offer my expertise on the issue of workplace sexual harassment. I am a lawyer and policy advocate specializing in workplace harassment reform, gender equity, and civil rights. I serve as Counsel at the Purple Method, providing strategic legal guidance, overseeing policy development, and collaborating with stakeholders to create safer and more equitable workplaces. I am responsible for advising on complex legal matters, drafting key policy documents, and ensuring that organizational initiatives align with legal standards and best practices in the fields of gender equity and anti-harassment.

In my work, I support employers as they implement best practices for addressing sexual misconduct, tailoring policies and programs to each specific company's culture, mission, and needs. I develop and implement anti-harassment and inclusive workplace trainings, creating customized programs that not only address legal compliance but foster a culture of accountability and respect. In addition to my work at the Purple Method, I am an Assistant Professor of Legal Studies at George Mason University, where I teach civil rights law and research equitable policy practices in the ever-changing policy landscape.

HB 6166 is an important first step toward prevention, accountability, and safety in the Rhode Island State Legislature. This legislation includes foundational and impactful reforms intended to improve the legislative workplace for all workers and ensure that sexual harassment is dealt with in a timely and effective manner.

TRANSPARENCY & TRAINING

The best way to create and maintain a harassment-free workplace is to prevent issues from occurring in the first place. Leadership must take a *proactive* approach to creating safe and inclusive workplaces, rather than merely reacting after incidents have already occurred. That means: (1) fostering an environment where employees feel comfortable voicing concerns and (2) effectively training employees on workplace policies to create shared norms and expectations. When employers are more transparent with employees, they tend to increase employee engagement and promote a stronger organizational

culture. Transparency can help prevent harassment from occurring in the first place, by fostering an environment that encourages employees to speak up about incidents they might experience or witness.

When taking steps to cultivate an intentional workplace where workers feel heard and valued, employers must create more transparent and employee-centered policies, thereby creating a shared culture around what behavior is acceptable. However, the best policies are only effective if employees are made aware of them. To educate employees on workplace policies, procedures, and expectations, employers must focus on implementing customized and interactive training to educate on and reinforce shared values.

Specifically, harassment prevention training raises awareness across the workplace about what constitutes harassment and the role individuals can play in helping to create a safe environment for everyone. A well-designed, customized training program can have an overwhelmingly positive impact on workplace culture – improving employees’ understanding of organizational policies, the type of conduct that is acceptable in the workplace, and how to report incidents. The result is an atmosphere where people feel more valued, safer, and more at ease, allowing them to be more committed.

As to the direct impact training has on individual workers, **employees report that anti-harassment training makes them feel more aware of how to report incidents, what their company’s specific policies are around sexual harassment, and what constitutes sexual misconduct:**

- 90% of employees reported that anti-harassment training made them more aware of how to report incidents of sexual harassment;
- 88% felt better informed of how their company handles sexual harassment incidents;
- After participating in training, 86% of employees reported feeling better educated about what constitutes sexual harassment.

Currently in Rhode Island, sexual harassment training is optional for state legislators. HB 6166 would require harassment training and public postings of completion data for all workers in the statehouse. This legislation would bring Rhode Island in line with best practices when it comes to anti-harassment training in the workplace. While federal law does not explicitly mandate sexual harassment training, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) strongly recommends it as part of an effective harassment prevention program.¹ Furthermore, training should be conducted annually and reinforced throughout the year.

As the EEOC notes, if anti-harassment training is not held on a consistent basis, employees will not believe that preventing harassment is a high priority for leadership and may fail to be aware of how to identify and report sexual harassment.

¹ While not all states have set mandatory guidelines for anti-harassment training, many have passed legislation requiring anti-harassment training to be conducted, and most states emphasize its importance. In fact, several states and cities have gone one step further by mandating sexual harassment training for individuals who do not fall under the “employee” category, including interns. These states include California, Connecticut, Delaware, Illinois, Maine, and New York.

REPORTING

Even the best preventative measures do not stop all problems from occurring. Thus, it is just as important for the statehouse to respond appropriately and effectively when misconduct does take place. That means: (1) breaking down barriers to internal reporting, (2) implementing thorough investigation processes, and (3) taking fair and proportionate corrective action that holds people accountable. **HB 6166 is a crucial step in achieving these best practices by establishing a neutral, nonpolitical reporting and enforcement channel for sexual harassment in the statehouse.**

Reporting is a central component of addressing workplace harassment, yet many people—especially those with less institutional power—remain hesitant to report instances of harassment. The legislature must implement processes that allow employees experiencing harm to feel empowered to report harassment and seek help to stop it. One of the main reasons that individuals fail to report harassment they witness or experience is the fear of retaliation. Safe, accessible, and conflict-of-interest-free reporting processes are necessary to mitigate the foremost reasons individuals decline to come forward about harassment: “receipt of blame for causing the offending actions; social retaliation (including humiliation and ostracism); and professional retaliation, such as damage to their career and reputation.”² These fears are not unfounded. Reports of sexual harassment are often met with minimization, hostility, and retaliation. **Of people who had spoken out about their workplace mistreatment, 75 percent faced some form of retaliation.**

As such, the implementation of a neutral, nonpolitical reporting and enforcement channel for sexual harassment in the statehouse is a crucial step to minimize conflicts of interest and ensure accountability. In addition to implementing neutral channels for reporting – including *anonymous* channels – reports must be met with a thorough and timely investigation, led by skilled, neutral investigators. Prioritizing a transparent investigation process sends a clear message to the workforce that leadership takes harassment seriously.

CONCLUSION

I conclude with an excerpt that rings true for the impact of the legislation in consideration by the Committee today:

Workplace culture has the greatest impact on allowing harassment to flourish, or conversely, in preventing harassment. The importance of leadership cannot be overstated - effective harassment prevention efforts, and workplace culture in which harassment is not tolerated, must start with and involve the highest level of management of the company. But a commitment (even from the top) to a diverse, inclusive, and respectful workplace is not enough. Rather, at all levels, across all positions, an organization must have systems in place that hold employees accountable for this expectation [. . .]. Finally, leadership means ensuring that anti-harassment efforts are given the necessary time and resources to be effective.

(2016 EEOC Select Task Force Report)

² Also finding that 70% of those subjected to workplace harassment do not report it and 75% of those who do report are subjected to retaliation, indicating that employees fear reporting misconduct because of the likelihood of ensuing retaliation.

I want to thank the Committee for its consideration today and Representative Tanzi for her work on this issue and her sponsorship of this important legislation. On behalf of the individuals who work in the Rhode Island Statehouse, I urge you to pass HB 6166 to ensure that employees are guaranteed the basic, fundamental right to work in an environment free from harassment and discrimination.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Shea Holman Kilian, J.D.". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Shea Holman Kilian, J.D.