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April 8, 2026

Madam President, Chairwoman, and Members of the Committee. I thank you for this opportunity to submit my testimony in writing as I am unable to attend and speak in person this evening.

My name is Heidi Rogers. I am the Vice President of the Foster Town Council, a graduate of Ponaganset High School, a Parent and a Grandparent. But, today, I am addressing you as a survivor of childhood sexual abuse. In my 60 years of life, I have never spoken about this publicly, nor did I ever intend to until House Bill H7356 was heard in the House Judiciary Committee. That was the first time I have ever testified before the Legislature, but if there was ever a time to bring my experience to the open, that time is now. If my testimony can help in getting a bill passed to protect our children, it is well worth it.

As a survivor, I know that the harm caused by sexual abuse does not end when the abuse stops. It carries forward into adulthood, affecting EVERY SINGLE ASPECT of a survivor's life. It lives with you every day. Many Survivors/victims go through life dealing with mental health issues, PTSD, anxiety, eating disorders, substance abuse issues, trust issues and depression. There are always triggers and reminders throughout your lifetime – all totally preventable. No child should carry this as part of their story. One of the hardest realities is knowing that many cases of abuse could have been avoided if proper safeguards were in place and were enforced.

Senate Bill S-2216 takes an essential and long-overdue step by mandating comprehensive background checks for any individual who works with children within Rhode Island's educational system. This is not optional and should not be treated as a formality. It is a fundamental duty of care. Adults who have access to children, whether as teachers, aides, contractors, volunteers, or support staff, must be thoroughly screened before being placed in positions of trust.

I am aware that there is a competing Bill S-3010 sponsored by Senator Valverde. This Bill does very little to address the issues and falls far short of what is necessary to protect our students. Below is an example of the contrast between S-2216 and S-3010 which leaves critical gaps open.

- **Scope:**
S-2216 applies to teachers, staff, and contractors; S-3010 applies only to non-teaching staff. Why?
- **Disclosure:**
S-2216 requires full disclosure of investigations, discipline, and resignations; S-3010 has narrower requirements.

- **Accountability:**
S-2216 mandates employer verification and closes known loopholes; S-3010 leaves key gaps in place.
- **Impact:**
S-2216 is a comprehensive, preventative reform; S-3010 is a limited, partial measure.

Senate Bill S-2216 establishes a clear line: child safety comes before convenience, staffing shortages, institutional comfort, union loyalty or campaign donations. As communities, school districts, Town Councils and the State Legislature, it is our duty and obligation to provide protections for students from falling victim to sexual predators. Extensive background checks, including prior employment history, are one of the most effective tools we have to prevent known sexual predators from gaining access to children. Failing to require them creates gaps that predators exploit. Requiring them closes those gaps and puts the safety of children first.

As survivors, many of us were harmed by individuals who were trusted, respected, or overlooked by the systems meant to protect us. S-2216 acknowledges that trust alone is not enough. Verification, accountability, and vigilance are necessary to prevent abuse before it occurs.

This legislation is not about punishment, it is about prevention. It reflects an understanding that protecting children requires PROACTIVE measures, not reactive apologies after harm has already occurred. Strong background check requirements help ensure that schools are safe environments where children can learn without fear, and parents can have confidence in the systems responsible for their children's care.

I urge you all to support Senate Bill S-2216, not only to honor and validate survivors like myself, but to fulfill your responsibility to protect Rhode Island's children. **As lawmakers, you have both the authority and the obligation to ensure that no child is placed in harm's way due to preventable gaps in policy. We can do this, and we need to do it right now. Passing this Bill is a clear and necessary step in meeting that responsibility. No parent should fear that their child is in danger of sexual abuse in an educational setting. No parent should have to worry about their child becoming the victim of a predator, especially by individuals entrusted with their care.**

I respectfully urge you to support and pass S-2216. Thank you for your time, your leadership, and your commitment to protecting children.

Respectfully,
Heidi Rogers