



Committed to Ending  
Domestic Violence, Sexual Assault and Human  
Trafficking

May 5, 2026

Chairman DiPalma  
Senate Finance Committee  
RI State House  
82 Smith Street  
Providence, RI 02903

Re: Testimony in support of S2848

Dear Chairman DiPalma and members of the committee,

I write in strong support Senator Murray's Joint Resolution to Support Sojourner House, S2848.

For 50 years, Sojourner House, a non-profit based in Providence but now providing services across the state, has served thousands of victims and survivors of domestic abuse, sexual violence, and human trafficking. We offer wraparound services such as support groups, emergency shelter, transitional and permanent supportive housing, sexual health advocacy, and emotional support. In 2025, Sojourner House helped over 5,000 victims of domestic violence, sexual assault, and human trafficking from 34 different RI cities and towns.

Five years ago, recognizing the shortage of affordable housing in our community, Sojourner House made the decision to begin housing development work of our own. Since then, we've made five real estate transactions and currently own or lease over 200 units statewide. This allows us to provide permanent supportive housing to victims, as we know this is the most effective way to help victims and their families transition out of very dangerous situations into safety.

Our comprehensive permanent supportive housing program and a rapid rehousing program provide critical, life-saving support to families who have experienced abuse. These programs, which include units across 34 cities and towns, help families rebuild their lives. We are the only victim service organization in Rhode Island developing affording housing.

Sojourner House receives more than 80% of its funding from federal sources, and most of those sources require that the organization finds a way to match their contribution.

While we have scraped together matching dollars so far, we are running out of places to find matching funds. Our work helps the state meet its affordable housing goals and so we are seeking a partnership with the State to secure matching funds for these federal grants, ensuring that we can continue to provide supportive housing and life-saving care to victims in Rhode Island. **This is a smart return on investment. Please support this \$500,000 allocation for Sojourner House.**

Thank you for your time and review of this testimony. Please contact me at [Vvolz@Sojournerri.org](mailto:Vvolz@Sojournerri.org) if you have any questions about our work or this testimony.

Sincerely,

Vanessa Volz  
Sojourner House, President and CEO

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Helplines: 401.765.3232 | 401.658.4334 | Web: [www.sojournerri.org](http://www.sojournerri.org)

### What can Sojourner House do with \$500K?

#### Investing \$500K in Sojo SAVES RI \$\$\$

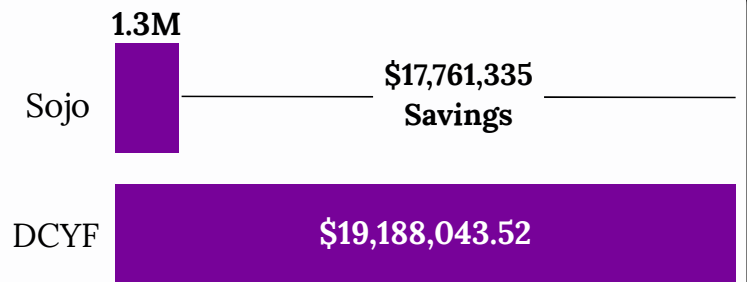
The requested \$500K allocation for Sojourner House would provide **lifesaving services** to Rhode Islander's facing domestic violence (DV) and human-trafficking, helping them **secure housing, mental health services, workforce readiness programs, and more.** This investment would:

- Provide housing and supportive services to **70 more adults and 127 more children in our state**
- **Bring in \$1.5 million in HUD funding (through grant-matching requirements) supporting Governor McKee's 2030 Housing Plan**
- **Save nearly \$18 million** preventing these children from DCYF involvement resulting from violence
- **Save over \$2.7 million** in domestic violence-related costs to the government

#### Domestic Violence & Children

#### Cost to serve 127 children

- **26%** of RI children are present for DV incidents triggering mandatory reporting to DCYF
- An estimated **30-60%** of children in foster care have witnessed DV, demonstrating the link between witnessing DV and foster care is clear
- The work at Sojourner House involves **intervening before** children are removed from their homes to support safe & healthy families
- This graph compares the cost to house & support **127 children** between Sojo and DCYF
  - The work DCYF does is crucial, but intervening, can keep families together and save state spending



When Sojo spends \$1.3M on 127 children (using the \$500K state funding) they are able to save DCYF funding

#### Not investing in Sojo COSTS RI lives

- Fleeing DV is often in *response to and leads to* increased severity & frequency of abuse
- Research shows DV agencies more effectively address DV-specific needs and produce better outcomes
- However, Sojo is already overburdened as are many orgs-- **In FY 2025, 95% (or 1,238 people) who called the Sojo hotline requesting shelter couldn't be supported due to lack of shelter space**

#### Sojourner House Services

Sojo serves as RI's Regional Access Point (RAP) ensuring DV victims across the state can access services

##### Housing

- Rapid Rehousing
- Shelter Beds
- Rental Assistance
- Housing Literacy

##### Wrap Around Services

- Mental Health Services
- Health Screenings
- Workforce Readiness
- Community Education
- Maternal Health
- Legal Support
- Transportation
- Basic Resources
- Benefits Access
- ... AND MORE!

##### 2025 Sojo Provided

150,068	56,420
Bed	Wrap Around
Nights	Services

COMMENTARY

# R.I. needs to prioritize funding to combat domestic violence

The Rhode Island General Assembly has an opportunity to strengthen and protect victim service programs amid uncertain federal funding, writes the president of Sojourner House

By **Vanessa Volz** Updated April 24, 2026, 5:55 a.m.



People grieve in front of the home where eight children were killed and two women were wounded during a domestic violence incident in Shreveport, La., on April 19, according to local authorities. BRANDON BELL/GETTY

In February, Rhode Island experienced the [devastating loss](#) of [two lives](#) after a mass shooting at a Pawtucket hockey rink, followed by a suicide. A [third victim](#) of the shooting died on Feb. 25.

In the immediate aftermath, reports described the incident as a “family dispute.” It’s a familiar phrase. It sounds neutral, even routine. But it’s also deeply misleading. Language doesn’t just describe a problem. It shapes how we understand it, how we prioritize it, and whether we invest in preventing it.

This kind of framing is not unique to one local tragedy. Just days ago in Louisiana, [eight children were killed](#) by their father in what authorities initially described as a “domestic dispute,” a phrase that softens and obscures the reality of extreme domestic violence.

A week before that, former Virginia Lieutenant Governor [Justin Fairfax](#) was reported to have killed his wife amid what authorities again described as a “domestic dispute,” a phrase that obscures patterns of coercion, control, and increasing violence. Again and again, we’ve seen incidents like these be treated as isolated, “complicated” situations rather than part of a broader, well-documented pattern of gender-based violence.

When we call these incidents “family disputes,” we obscure what they often are: domestic violence — sometimes years in the making, often escalating, and tragically predictable. When we fail to name [domestic violence](#) accurately, we make it easier to minimize, and that makes it easier to justify doing less about it.

Across the country, funding for victim services is not just uncertain, it is actively and aggressively being reduced. The federal Victims of Crime Act has already experienced [devastating cuts](#) over the last several years. President Trump’s recently released proposed budget for the next fiscal year would [reduce funding](#) for the Office on Violence Against Women (OVW) by roughly 25 percent, eliminating more than \$180 million in grants that support services like emergency shelter, legal assistance, and housing.

The proposal also would consolidate OVW into a larger entity called a “Bureau of Justice Grants,” effectively sidelining a department that already has long been under-resourced and undervalued.

At the same time, the demand for lifesaving support is rising. At [Sojourner House](#), our hotline calls increased 125 percent from 2024 to 2025. We hear from survivors every day trying to leave dangerous situations. Many have children, and most have nowhere safe to go. And too often, we cannot offer them a safe bed that night.

In fiscal year 2025, only about 5 percent of those seeking emergency shelter through our hotline were able to be placed the same night.

Increasingly, our advocates are helping survivors think through where they can safely sleep — sometimes in their cars, or staying in untenable situations with an abusive partner — because there are no beds available.

It’s not because we don’t know how to help. It’s because we don’t have the resources to help everyone who needs it.

In the wake of tragedies, we say we care about public safety and that we want to prevent violence, but the budgets that follow tell a different story.

Budgets are not just about resources; they reflect what we value and prioritize. And right now, we are not prioritizing victim safety.

Federal funding through the [Office on Violence Against Women](#) is essential infrastructure and not just discretionary. Without it, shelters eliminate beds, affordable housing options diminish, advocates carry impossible caseloads, and programs disappear.

Here in Rhode Island, where state investment in victim services remains minimal, these federal cuts carry even greater consequences. The CDC estimates that [46.7 percent of women in Rhode Island](#) have experienced intimate partner violence, a rate higher than

any other New England state. Since 2016, we've seen 60 domestic violence homicides. Despite the horror of this reality, Rhode Island does not have a dedicated state funding line for domestic violence services, unlike our neighbors in Massachusetts and Maine.

We should be expanding funding for this critical work to support victims and survivors; not dismantling it. This legislative session, we urge the Rhode Island General Assembly to invest in the work of Sojourner House ([H7324/S2848](#)) and create a Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Survivor Services Fund ([H8156](#)). Language alone will not stop violence. But it shapes what we see, and what we are willing to act on.

And if we fail to name domestic violence clearly, we will fail to stop it. If we want fewer stories like the one we witnessed in Pawtucket this winter — or in Virginia just a few days ago — we will have to start telling them differently.

*Vanessa Volz is the president and CEO of [Sojourner House](#).*

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