
Testimony in Support of S2161, S2711, S2299, and S2313

From Meghna Tummala <meghna.tu@gmail.com>

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To Senate Judiciary Committee <SenateJudiciary@rilegislature.onmicrosoft.com>

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Dear Chairperson Senator LaMountain and Members of the Senate Judiciary Committee,

My name is Meghna, and I am a resident of Providence. I am writing to express my strong support for S2161, S2711, S2299, and S2313.

As a medical student who has worked locally and is soon to be a resident physician, I strongly believe that these bills support the health of folks involved with the judicial system, as well as our community's overall wellbeing. These bills represent important steps toward creating a more fair, effective, and humane justice system in Rhode Island. They address both unnecessary incarceration and the long-term barriers that criminal records create for people who are trying to move forward with their lives and contribute to their communities.

S2161 – Bail on 32

S2161 would create a more balanced and transparent process for individuals accused of probation violations. The bill requires courts to presume release for most probation violations, set reasonable bail or non-monetary conditions, limit detention to cases involving genuine risk or danger, require prompt hearings, and mandate written reasons when someone is detained.

Rhode Island currently has one of the harshest probation systems in the country. Individuals accused of probation violations can be incarcerated without bail while waiting for a hearing, often for weeks. **This can be deadly, as Carol Pona experienced in 2023.** While awaiting her probation hearing, she spent 3 months in the ACI, was ultimately diagnosed with liver cancer, and died within hours of release from prison. For others, this period of waiting can have similarly devastating consequences, resulting in the loss of employment, housing, and stability, including when the alleged violation would not normally result in jail time.

This system also contributes significantly to incarceration in Rhode Island. Alleged probation violators make up a large portion of admissions to the Adult Correctional Institutions, which places unnecessary strain on individuals, families, and taxpayers. Reforms like S2161 help ensure that detention is reserved for cases where it is truly necessary while protecting due process.

Clean Slate Initiative Bills

I also strongly support the Clean Slate Initiative bills S2711, S2299, and S2313, which would improve Rhode Island's expungement process and create meaningful second chances for people who have completed their sentences and demonstrated rehabilitation.

S2711 would authorize the automatic expungement of eligible conviction records through electronic processes within the judicial system. Many people who qualify for expungement never receive it because the current process is complicated, expensive, or difficult to navigate. Automating expungement ensures that individuals who have already met the legal requirements can truly move forward.

S2299 would allow the expungement of multiple non-violent felony convictions ten years after a sentence has been completed. People who have lived law-abiding lives for many years should have the opportunity to rebuild their futures without being permanently defined by past mistakes.

S2313 would reduce the waiting period for expungement eligibility to three years for a single misdemeanor and five years for felonies and multiple misdemeanors. Shortening these timelines reflects the reality that individuals who remain conviction-free for several years are highly unlikely to reoffend and deserve a fair chance to pursue employment, housing, and stability.

Criminal records can create lifelong barriers to employment, housing, and education. These reforms would allow more Rhode Islanders to contribute fully to their communities and support their families.

For these reasons, I respectfully urge the Senate Judiciary Committee to support and pass S2161, S2711, S2299, and S2313.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Meghna Tummala

Providence, Rhode Island