



**Testimony Re: S-2940 Relating to Courts and Civil Procedure –
Family Court
Senate Judiciary Committee
March 10, 2026
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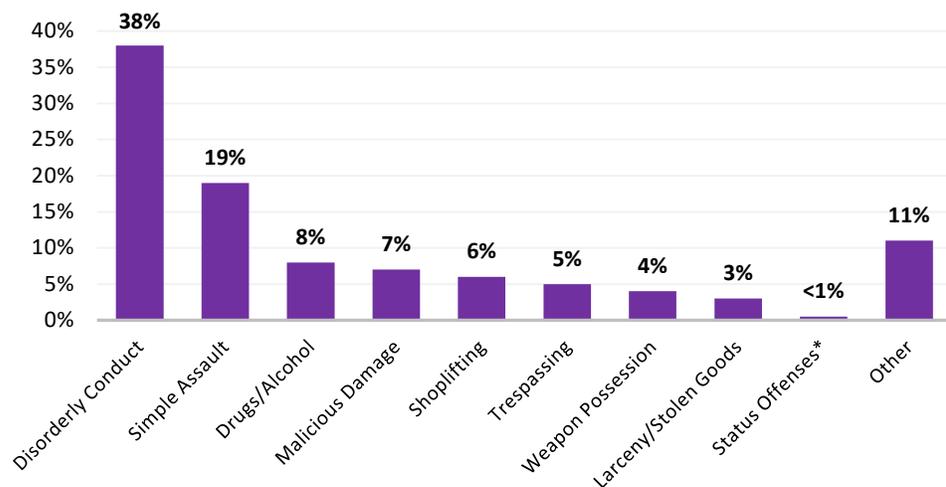
Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today. We would also like to thank Senator Vargas for sponsoring this important bill and Senators LaMountain, Quezada, Bell, DiMario, Urso, Mack, Acosta, Bissailon, and Euer for co-sponsoring. Rhode Island KIDS COUNT strongly supports Senate Bill 2940, which would establish a full-time juvenile hearing board coordinator to provide support and assistance to municipal juvenile hearing boards across the state, automate referrals to hearing boards for youth charged with a first-time misdemeanor, and require an annual data report.

Juvenile Hearing Boards (JHBs) provide a community-based option that diverts youth from formal court involvement. Comprised of volunteer community members, JHBs permit the diversion of youth accused of lower-level offenses, including status offenses and misdemeanors. Youth who complete sanctions, such as community service, restitution, and counseling, are often able to avoid having a court record following this process.

In 2024, there were 35 JHBs in Rhode Island, 25 of which were active. Four communities did not have a JHB (Little Compton, North Kingstown, Richmond, and South Kingstown). Rhode Island JHBs reported hearing 254 cases in 2024. In 2024, over half (53%) of youth referred to JHBs were white, 23% were Hispanic, and 23% were Black.



Youth Referred to Juvenile Hearing Boards by Offense, 2024



N=279

Source: Rhode Island for Community and Justice, 2024. The total number of cases (254) in 2024 is smaller than the total number of offenses (279) because some youth are charged with more than one offense. *Status offenses are age-related acts that would not be punishable if the offender were an adult, such as truancy and disobedient conduct.

Established in Rhode Island in the 1970's, JHBs have been a cornerstone in the community and have provided youth and their families with community-based resources, activities, supportive and rehabilitative services, and opportunities as an alternative to formal court involvement. This is a well-established diversion pathway away from the youth justice system that has consistently low recidivism rates.

The foundational principle of the JHB is rooted in restorative justice. Restorative justice practices offer a meaningful way to engage the youth offender, victim, and community in conversation and action to restore balance to the community. These practices are well aligned with the ways in which young people learn from their mistakes. Restorative justice provides an opportunity for the youth who committed the offense to take responsibility for their actions, understand the harm their actions may have caused, and empathize with the victim while making amends for their actions and repairing the community dynamic. The open dialogue afforded by restorative justice opportunities gets at the root cause of a youth's actions by centering their voice in the narrative. This helps determine the type of support they need moving forward to mature into a responsible adult.

Youth justice systems have a range of options for monitoring and rehabilitating youth, which include restorative justice programs. **Alternatives to formal justice involvement have been shown to be more effective in preventing recidivism, more cost effective, and are often the more appropriate response to developmentally typical child and adolescent behavior that is often criminalized.**

Senate Bill 2940 ensures that the JHBs have the support they need to be effective. This bill updates a statute established in 1998 and 2000 that enabled the Chief Judge of the Family Court to appoint a statewide JHB coordinator and re-establishes one FTE at the Rhode Island Family Court for that role.

This bill will also automate referrals to the JHBs for first-time misdemeanor offenses. Some municipalities already send their first-time misdemeanor cases straight to their JHB. This is an excellent practice to standardize across the state and would improve equity and outcomes for all youth. There is also a refusal clause in this bill, so if the family prefers to have the youth's first-time misdemeanor case go through the Family Court, they can do so. This bill will set a standard for youth diversion that will increase equity in referrals to the JHBs. Currently, youth of color are diverted from formal court involvement at much lower rates than their white peers, even though research shows that diversion improves youth outcomes including lowering recidivism rates.

Lastly, we would recommend one minor amendment to Page 2, Lines 19-20 which states "*...juveniles shall be referred to the hearing board in the municipality in which they reside.*" We would recommend amending it to read, "**...juveniles shall be referred to the municipality in which the alleged offense occurred.**" This would align the language in (c) with (b) and align with current practice in the field of referring a youth to the JHB in the municipality the alleged offense occurred to restore the harm that was caused to that community.

Senate Bill 2940 will ensure youth and their families are connected with community-based services and supports and help Rhode Island continue its path of youth justice reform, and we urge passage.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony.

Rhode Island Juvenile Hearing Boards



Senate Bill 2940 (Vargas)

What are Juvenile Hearing Boards?

Rooted in restorative justice, juvenile hearing boards (JHBs) provide a community-based option that **diverts youth from formal court involvement**. Comprised of volunteer community members, JHBs permit the diversion of youth accused of lower-level offenses - including status offenses and misdemeanors. Youth who complete sanctions (such as community service, restitution, and counseling) are often able to avoid having a court record following this process.



What is restorative justice?

Restorative justice practices offer a meaningful way to engage the youth offender, victim, and community in conversation and action to restore balance to the community. **These practices are well aligned with the ways in which young people learn from their mistakes.** Restorative justice provides an opportunity for the youth who committed the offense to take responsibility for their actions, understand the harm their actions may have caused, and empathize with the victim while making amends for their actions.

How does this bill support youth?

Senate Bill 2940 ensures that the JHBs have the support they need to be the effective alternative resource that they are, and ensures equity among referrals to the JHBs. This bill:

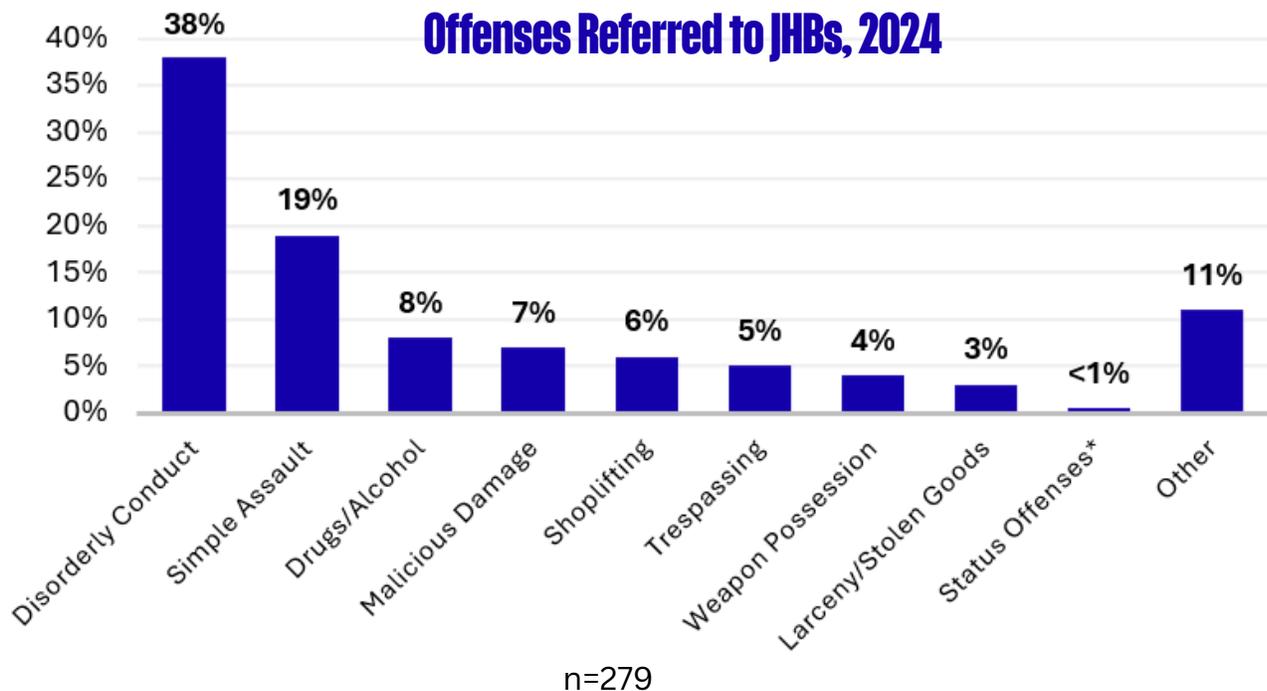
- **Automates referrals to the JHBs for first-time misdemeanor offenses.** This will set a standard for youth diversion that will increase equity among referrals to the JHBs.
- Re-establishes the role of a **state-wide JHB coordinator.**
- Requires annual **data reporting.**

RHODE ISLAND JUVENILE HEARING BOARDS



SENATE BILL 2940 (VARGAS)

What types of offenses are referred to JHBs?



Source: Rhode Island for Community and Justice, 2024. *Status offenses are age-related acts that would not be punishable if the offender were an adult, such as truancy and disobedient conduct.

Juvenile Hearing Boards are Effective

In 2024, there were 35 JHBs in Rhode Island, 25 of which were active. Four communities did not have a JHB (Little Compton, North Kingstown, Richmond, and South Kingstown). Research shows that diversion improves youth outcomes, including lowering recidivism rates. Still, youth of color are diverted at much lower rates than their white peers. In 2024, over half (53%) of youth referred to JHBs were white, 23% were Hispanic, and 23% were Black. Alternatives to formal justice involvement are more effective in preventing recidivism among youth, are more cost effective, and are often the more appropriate response to developmentally typical youth behavior that is often criminalized. **Senate Bill 2940 enables automatic referrals to JHBs for first-time misdemeanor offenses for youth in every municipality.**