



RE: Testimony in support of S3143, The Rhode Island Voting Rights Act

Dear Chair LaMountain and Members of the Committee:

We write in strong support for Senate Bill 3143 which seeks to codify central aspects of the federal Voting Rights Act into state law to ensure this essential right is protected in our state. The proposed bill is of particular importance for survivors of domestic violence, sexual assault, and human trafficking. Specifically, tactics used by abusers such as intimidation, isolation, and coercion can disproportionately affect voting access without protections proposed in S3143.

Founded 50 years ago, Sojourner House is a state-wide organization providing housing and wrap around services to survivors of domestic violence, sexual assault, and human trafficking. Since our founding in 1976, we have served over 60,000 survivors of abuse on their journey to emotional and economic stability. Last year alone, we supported over five thousand Rhode Islanders in crisis.

Survivors of domestic violence face unique and well-documented obstacles to participating in elections. Research shows that these barriers can include **intimidation and threats of violence related to voting, isolation from election information, and serious privacy risks tied to voter registration systems.**ⁱ According to the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, “The extent of election-related domestic violence in all its forms, including physical violence, is currently undocumented but believed to be substantial.”ⁱⁱ These are not abstract concerns; rather, they are lived realities that prevent many survivors from safely exercising their fundamental right to vote.

Isolation is a prominent way in which abusers maintain power over survivors of domestic violence. Isolation from outside communication, internet usage, and phone access can severely limit survivors’ ability to access crucial voting information (e.g., polling locations, voting options, registration deadlines).^{i,iii} Additionally, intimidation and coercion are other key components of domestic violence frequently experienced by survivors. Abusers may threaten harm, financial instability, or loss of child custody if a survivor votes or votes in a certain way.^{iv} **Senate Bill 3143 directly addresses this by prohibiting intimidation, deception, and obstruction in the voting process. For survivors, this provision is critical because it recognizes that control over voting can be another form of abuse and affirms that such behavior has no place in democracy.**

In many states, voter registration information such as home addresses can be publicly accessible and can be particularly devastating for survivors of domestic and sexual violence.^v This is not currently true in Rhode Island. Individuals with court-ordered protections related to domestic violence can register for the address confidentiality program to ensure they are not publicly accessible. Senate Bill 3143’s protections against policies that disproportionately burden certain groups, along with its emphasis on equal access and court-enforced remedies, provide a pathway to continue to ensure systems don’t inadvertently endanger survivors.

Lastly, S3143 does not require proof of intentional discrimination, only that a policy results in unequal access or participation. **This standard is essential for survivors, whose barriers are often systemic and indirect rather than explicitly targeted. At its core, this legislation recognizes a simple truth that a right that cannot be**

exercised safely is not a meaningful right at all. Survivors of domestic violence should not have to choose between their personal safety and their civic participation.

By prohibiting voter suppression, strengthening protections against intimidation, and ensuring equal access to the ballot, S3143 takes an important step toward a more inclusive and just democracy where survivors can participate freely and without fear. Please support 3143 and protect Rhode Islanders' rights to vote.

ⁱ Root, D. (2024). Obstacles to voting for survivors of intimate partner violence. *Family & Intimate Partner Violence Quarterly*, 16(4), 17-27. https://www.civicrosearchinstitute.com/online/PDF/FIPV-1604-03-Root-Voting_Obstacles.pdf

ⁱⁱ Ballington, J., Bardall, G., & Borovsky, G. (2017). Preventing violence against women in elections: A programming guide. pp. 26. <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Headquarters/Attachments/Sections/Library/Publications/2017/Preventing-VAW-in-elections-en.PDF>

ⁱⁱⁱ Swan, T. (17 Sept, 2024). Hidden barriers: Domestic violence and obstacles to voting. The Know More Blog. <https://www.nomore.org/hidden-barriers-domestic-violence-and-obstacles-to-voting/>

^{iv} The National Domestic Violence Hotline (n.d.). Children as an Abusive Mechanism. <https://www.thehotline.org/2014/08/29/children-as-an-abusive-mechanism/>

^v Rolph, A. (2018). Voting can be dangerous for domestic violence survivors in Washington State. KUOW, NPR Network. <https://www.kuow.org/stories/for-domestic-violence-survivors-voting-can-be-dangerous>