

Good afternoon members of the House Finance Committee,

My name is Andrea Gonzalez Sanchez. I am here in strong support of Bill H7545, which would provide funding to increase the number of Social Workers in public schools across Rhode Island. I am a program coordinator at Young Voices, a Crisis Counselor at a Suicide Prevention Hotline, and a future Social Worker. First, however, I would like to share my story as a survivor.

At 15 years old I was in a very unstable household filled with fear, anger, and pain. I felt there was no hope left and made the decision to take my own life. At such an early age, these thoughts can be so scary and overwhelming, but I was really fortunate to have someone by my side to help me get through them. My school social worker, Nikki, was there for me. It was thanks to her unconditional support that I healed, and soon got enough resources to leave my household once I graduated High School. I can say without a doubt that without her, I would not be here today.

I consider myself one of the lucky ones, because sadly many young people in Rhode Island aren't alive today to tell their stories. Their needs went unnoticed for too long; they never got to meet their Nikki. This may come as a surprise to people, but many schools do not have a designated Social Worker in there daily. These professionals are dividing their time between multiple schools, and might only be available on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Students don't get to choose the days that they are in crisis, so if they are struggling with suicidal thoughts on Wednesday, who will be there for them? If we are serious about addressing the mental health crisis in our schools, then no death to suicide should be acceptable, no matter the day.

In these past years working alongside youth as an educator and a crisis counselor, I have witnessed a tremendous increase in their mental health needs. Youth have told me that they feel hopeless, that they have no one to turn to, that they've been left behind and forgotten. In those moments I do my best to provide them with support, but I know that my reach can only extend so far. We need a vast array of Social Workers that can meet youth emotionally where they are, wherever they are, whenever they are. Social Workers are essential to preserving and improving the lives of students. They are advocates, therapists, and resource coordinators. We need them on the frontlines, to make sure no youth ever has to feel that despair again.

Today, you have multiple future Social Workers in front of you, showing that there is no lack of will from mental health professionals to see this work done in schools. We recognize it, and the students demand it. The real question is, do you have the political will to do what is necessary? Social workers save lives, but so can you. Allocate the resources that are necessary to sustain more social workers in our schools by passing H7545.

Thank you for your time

Andrea Gonzalez Sanchez