



March 5, 2024

Chair Robert E. Craven, Sr.
House Judiciary Committee
Rhode Island State House
82 Smith St.
Providence, RI 02903

RE: Support for House Bills No. 7449 and 7747 (Criminal Injuries Compensation)

Dear Chair Craven and Members of the Judiciary Committee,

I am writing on behalf of the nonprofit Sojourner House in strong support of House Bills No. 7449 and 7747, which would make the Crime Victim Compensation Program (CVCP) more accessible to victims and survivors of sexual assault and would allow victims to make their current residences safer rather than requiring that the money be spent on relocation costs.

Sojourner House is a comprehensive victim services agency dedicated to supporting and advocating for victims of domestic violence, sexual assault, and human trafficking. For 48 years, our nonprofit has served thousands of victims and survivors of domestic violence, sexual assault, and human trafficking. As the longtime Executive Director of Sojourner House, I speak from experience when I share with you that such changes to the CVCP are crucial as we help victims and survivors find ways to heal and thrive after experiencing abuse. Thank you for considering these important pieces of legislation.

In particular, **House Bill No. 7449** would permit victims of sexual assault to use a medical forensic exam in place of a police report to show that they have been the victim of a sex crime. Passage of this bill would bring Rhode Island in line with at least 10 other states that have already recognized the challenges faced by victims of a crime that is frequently not reported to the police. U.S. Department of Justice statistics show that more than two-thirds of sexual assaults are never reported to the police and 20% of victims have not completed a police report due to their fear of retaliation. Due to such under-reporting, Sojourner House firmly believes that Rhode Island must make it easier for victims of sexual assault to access crime victim funds that help victims rebuilt their lives. We support this bill's effort to remove a known barrier (that of a police

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report) that victims face when seeking compensation funds. We know from firsthand experience that victims are considerably more likely to seek medical attention than file a police report. This bill would expand support to those who would currently be ineligible and would make up to \$25,000 available to each victim who submits the results of a medical examination within three years of experiencing such abuse. Victims of sexual assault can receive financial support through the CVCP for lost wages, medical costs, mental health counseling, and more. Sojourner House can attest to how helpful such support is when victims are working to rebuild their lives.

House Bill No. 7747 uniquely addresses the housing crisis that has impacted so many Rhode Islanders – by allowing victims to access CVCP funds to make reasonable modifications to their homes to ensure their safety rather than requiring them to use such funds to relocate. This bill would allow home security measures that are currently not able to be covered by Program funds so that victims can ensure their safety. The funds could be used to install modest home security systems, change the locks, and make other alterations so that they can be more safely protected in their own homes. At a time when our current housing market makes it ever more difficult to find new, affordable places to live, this bill would help victims stay in their homes and would give them a measure of control over their lives. We support these efforts to help victims and survivors of abuse move forward on their journeys to safety and recovery. We understand that this bill does not expand funds for this program but merely expands the options that victims can choose. The National Association of Crime Victim Compensation Board reports that only 8% of victim compensation funds are allocated to supporting sexual assault victims. Given these statistics, Sojourner House recognizes that expanding the eligibility for this program and how victims can use these funds will have a profound impact on the lives of Rhode Islanders.

We urge this Committee to support both bills due to the potential they have to make a real difference in the lives of our most vulnerable community members. Thank you for your time and review of this testimony, and for your continued efforts to support victims of violent crime in Rhode Island. If you have any questions about our work or this testimony, please contact me at volz@sojournerri.org, or by phone at (401) 861-6191.

Sincerely,

Vanessa Volz
Executive Director

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