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H7575- Rhode Island Library Association in support

Background: Attempts to ban books from libraries are rising at an unprecedented level across the country.

- Between January 1 and August 31, 2023, American Library Association's Office for Intellectual Freedom reported 695 attempts to censor library materials and services and documented challenges to 1,915 unique titles.
- The number of unique titles challenged has increased by 20% from the same reporting period in 2022, a year that shattered censorship records.
- Most of the challenges were to books written by or about a person of color or a member of the LGBTQIA+ community.
- As the library's mission is to provide education and access to books for readers of all ages, beliefs, and backgrounds, these book challenges are in direct conflict with the values and principles of libraries and their communities.

Context:

- Across the nation, librarians and educators have been increasingly subject to criminal prosecution and/or harassment for teaching about and/or providing materials about sex, gender or race.
- Forty-four states across the country already have laws in place that assert an affirmative defense for librarians and educators in their obscenity laws. Rhode Island remains the only New England state that does not currently have exemptions from prosecution for bona fide professionals including teachers, librarians, and museum educators who are doing their jobs in developing their collections.

Role of Librarians and Educators:

- Libraries and educational institutions carry out the essential purpose of making available to all citizens a current, balanced collection of books that reflects the cultural diversity and pluralistic nature of American society.
- Librarians and teachers are highly educated professionals, and should be able to do their work without fear of criminal prosecution or legal action taken against them for providing access to materials that a small minority of the community might find objectionable.
- Public and school libraries already have a clear, standardized process whereby members of the public can document their concerns and request reconsideration of materials.
- Educators and librarians have collection development policies, approved by their governing bodies, that detail the types of materials they select and why.
- Librarians affirm the rights of parents/guardians to guide their children in selecting materials to take home; libraries provide a "marketplace" of materials to serve all.

There are financial implications to consider:

- Our libraries, museums, and educational institutions should not have to expend their valuable and limited financial resources fighting litigation and potential criminal prosecution for fulfilling their mission. Doing so would redirect precious public funds from purchasing materials and providing services, to defending staff from lawsuits.

The Rhode Island Library Association urges the passage of H 7575.