

Feb 5th 2025

To: The Honorable Members of the Rhode Island House Judiciary Committee:

I am writing to express **my opposition** to House Bill 5071, which seeks to classify state government caseworkers and investigators as "public officials" under the existing statute that prohibits threats against public officials. AS a licensed clinical social worker and a social work educator in RI for over 25 years, I understand the intent to protect these individuals from threats is commendable. However, I have several concerns regarding the implications of this bill.

1. Overbroad Definition of "Public Official":

Expanding the definition of "public official" to include state government caseworkers and investigators may inadvertently encompass a wide range of individuals whose roles, while important, differ significantly from those traditionally considered public officials. This broad categorization could lead to unintended legal consequences and complicate the statute's enforcement.

2. Potential Impact on Free Speech:

The proposed expansion could impact free speech. Citizens expressing dissatisfaction or criticism of caseworkers' decisions might fear legal repercussions, even when their statements do not constitute genuine threats. This could deter individuals from voicing legitimate concerns about government services.

3. Existing Protections Are Adequate:

Current laws already protect all individuals, including caseworkers and investigators, against threats and harassment. Enhancing the enforcement of these statutes may be a more effective approach than broadening the definition of "public official."

4. Legal Ambiguities:

The bill does not clearly define the scope of who qualifies as a "state government caseworker" or "investigator." I want to bring your attention to this bill's definition of a caseworker. It states that "*case worker means a social worker...*" which can be problematic. Not all caseworkers in the State have a Bachelor's or Master's in Social Work to call themselves a social worker. This ambiguity could lead to inconsistent application of the law and potential legal challenges.

In conclusion, while the safety and well-being of state employees are of the utmost importance, House Bill 5071, as currently drafted, presents significant concerns that outweigh its intended benefits. I urge the committee to reconsider this bill and explore alternative measures to protect caseworkers and investigators without broadening the definition of "public official."

Thank you for considering my testimony.

Sincerely,



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