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March 26, 2025

The Honorable Robert E. Craven, Sr., Chair
House Committee on Judiciary
State House
82 Smith St.
Providence, RI 02903

RE: H 5436 -- An Act Relating to Criminal Offenses – Rhode Island Assault Weapons Ban Act of 2025

Dear Chair Craven:

Please accept this letter of support for H 5436, legislation that would define various assault weapons and would restrict the manufacture, sale, purchase, and possession of these assault weapons.

As the Director of the Rhode Island Department of Health (RIDOH), I am deeply concerned about the adverse effects of firearm-related injuries and violence in both Rhode Island and in our nation. Gun violence is a public health crisis. Assault weapons are linked to mass shootings and are exceptionally deadly firearms. Assault Weapons are also commonplace in mass shootings. These weapons are generally capable of firing far more bullets, far faster than manual-action hunting rifles.

Supported by the National Institute of Justice, the Violence Project notes that, during the period of August 1, 1966 - July 3, 2023, assault weapons were over-represented in mass shootings, compared to other forms of gun violence. Over half of the deadliest mass shootings in history have involved assault weapons, with their use spiking from 19% in the 1990s to nearly 60% in the 2020s. Assault weapons are seen as more effective for inflicting mass casualties, and their use in past mass shootings have inspired copycat shooters. In a nationally representative survey of 10,000 people, broad psychological impacts on people were observed. 28% of Americans are “worried or very worried” about themselves or their child being shot at school. 20% of Americans had a mass shooting occur in their local community. Research suggests that banning assault weapons and high-capacity magazines could significantly reduce mass shootings and deaths (<https://www.theviolenceproject.org/>)

A 2019 study found that mass shooting fatalities were 70% less likely to occur from 1994 to 2004, when there was federal prohibition on assault weapons. Between 2009 and 2020, when assault weapons were used in a mass shooting, six times as many people were shot, twice as many people were killed, and 22 times as many people were wounded per incident on average, compared to mass shootings where assault weapons were not used (Source: Everytown for Gun Safety Support Fund, “Twelve Years of Mass Shootings in the United States,” June 4, 2021).

Since 2012, the seven deadliest mass shooting incidents in America all involved the use of assault weapons (Las Vegas, NV; Orlando, FL; Newtown, CT; Sutherland Springs, TX; El Paso, TX; Parkland, FL; and Uvalde, TX).

Many detractors of this bill may site the use of firearms for home protection; however, in upholding the Massachusetts assault weapon ban in 2019, the 1st Circuit Court of Appeals said there was no evidence an assault weapon has ever been used for home defense:

“In fact, not one of the plaintiffs or their six experts could identify even a single example of the use of an assault weapon for home self-defense, nor could they identify even a single example of a self-defense episode in which ten or more shots were fired.” (Source: Worman v. Healey, United States Court of Appeals, First Circuit decision).

A poll conducted by Fleming & Associates for Rhode Island AFL-CIO found that 63% of 400 registered voters favor the proposed assault weapons ban bill (Source: The Providence Journal, “Is there public support for an ‘assault weapons’ ban in RI? Here’s what the numbers say.” Feb 24, 2025).

An increase in firearm deaths was observed among Rhode Island residents each year from 2018-2021, before observing a decline during 2022. Specifically, 61 firearm deaths were observed in 2021, which was approximately a 70% increase from the number of deaths observed in 2018. This increase was mostly driven by an increase in firearm-related homicide deaths observed during this time. (Source: Rhode Island Violent Death Reporting System (RIVDRS), deaths among Rhode Island residents, 2018-2022).

A total of 452 firearm-related hospital visits were observed among Rhode Island residents during 2019-2023 and nearly 75% of these visits occurred among Rhode Islanders younger than 35 years old. (Source: Rhode Island Hospital Discharge Data, 2019-2023, RIDOH). The increase in firearm fatalities and firearm-related hospital visits observed in recent years emphasize the critical need for this bill.

Nine states, as well as the District of Columbia, have enacted laws that generally ban the sale, manufacture, and transfer of assault weapons. The nine states are California, Connecticut, Delaware, Hawaii, Illinois, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Jersey, and New York.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this proposed legislation that will save lives.

Sincerely,



Jerome M. Larkin, MD
Director

CC: The Honorable Jason Knight
The Honorable Members of the House Committee on Judiciary
Nicole McCarty, Esquire, Chief Legal Counsel
Lynne Urbani, Director of House Policy
