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ALA American Library Association

The American Library Association stands in support of the Rhode Island Freedom to Read Act (S0238, H5726), a vital piece of legislation aimed at protecting the fundamental American right to free speech, free inquiry, and the right for Rhode Islanders to form and express their own opinions, as laid out by the First Amendment and the Rhode Island Constitution.

The American Library Association (ALA) is the foremost national organization providing resources to inspire library and information professionals to transform their communities through essential programs and services. For more than 140 years, the ALA has been the trusted voice for academic, public, school, government, and special libraries, advocating for the profession and the library's role in enhancing learning and ensuring access to information for all. The American Library Association affirms that all libraries are forums for information and ideas and that access to information through libraries is critical to learning and exercising our democratic freedoms.

A crucial aspect of ensuring access to information is prohibiting retaliation and intimidation against library employees for performing their duties in a manner consistent with the First Amendment and state standards. Frivolous lawsuits against library employees not only deplete public resources, they also create an environment of fear that produces censorship and deprives Rhode Islanders of their First Amendment rights. This legislation shields Rhode Island library employees from frivolous lawsuits for work performed in good faith as part of their job and safeguards against wasteful spending.

In addition, this legislation establishes clear guidelines and expectations for library acquisition and review policies that protect Rhode Island communities from censorship attempts by outside groups and are consistent with best practices for professional librarianship.

Finally, the Rhode Island Freedom to Read Act is especially timely given the current attacks facing libraries and threatening the freedom to read. The American Library Association has collected data on censorship in US libraries for over thirty years. Since 2020, the ALA has documented an unprecedented rise in censorship; in 2023 we recorded the highest level ever documented by the ALA. The majority of Americans do not support censorship; this historic rise in censorship has been driven by special interest groups that do not represent mainstream public opinion. In addition, the rise in demands to censor and remove library materials coincides with increased reports of harassment, intimidation, and even death threats directed towards library employees simply for performing their professional duties and upholding the First Amendment. Restricting access to information and threatening information professionals not only violates the law, it endangers everyone's right to learn, think critically, and make decisions for their own lives and communities.

Libraries have and continue to be a site for Americans to exercise their democratic freedoms and it is crucial that we continue to protect these spaces for ourselves and future generations. As the ALA says in our Freedom to Read Statement, "Freedom has given the United States the elasticity to endure strain. Freedom keeps open the path of novel and creative solutions and enables change to come by choice.... those with faith in free people will stand firm on these constitutional guarantees of essential rights and will exercise the responsibilities that accompany these rights."

Supporting the Rhode Island Freedom to Read Act protects Rhode Islanders' essential rights. Thank you for your attention to this critical issue.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Cindy Hohl". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Cindy Hohl, President
The American Library Association