

The Immigrant Coalition

To: Representative Robert Craven, Chair
House Judiciary Committee and
Members of the Committee

Re: Support for:
H-5511 (Safe Roads and Mandatory Insurance)
H-5518 (Rhode Island Values Act – Enhanced Community Protection in Immigration Enforcement Action)
H-5788 (Family Court – Abused, Neglected, Abandoned Young Immigrants)

Date: March 26, 2019

The Immigrant Coalition, is an association of 34 Rhode Island organizations committed to ensuring fair and equal treatment of our immigrant neighbors.

We write in support of the three bills referenced above, each of which provides important protections and rights for immigrants. We address each bill separately.

Support for H-5511. This bill would allow the Department of Motor Vehicles to issue driving privilege licenses/permits to certain Rhode Islanders who are unable to establish lawful presence in the United States. Twelve states, including two New England states, Connecticut and Vermont, as well as the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico have already enacted laws allowing driver's licenses for undocumented residents.¹

As conveyed by its title, this bill is a public safety measure that will ensure we are all safer when we are on the road. To gain a license, a driver must demonstrate basic knowledge of traffic laws, have good vision and pass a driving test. The AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety reports that unlicensed drivers are almost five times more likely to be in a fatal accident than licensed drivers. In addition, licensed drivers are required to purchase automobile insurance which can lead to lower-cost insurance for all drivers.

The bill will also promote economic participation and opportunity for residents who are contributing to our state's economy. Undocumented immigrants contribute an estimated \$31.2 million in total taxes to Rhode Island, including \$3.9 million in personal income taxes, \$17.6 million in sales and excise taxes, and \$9.7 million in property taxes (as home owners or renters).² Under the proposed bill, only individuals who have filed tax returns (or are the dependent of such person) for two years prior to applying for the driving privilege license/permit would be eligible for a driving privilege license/permit. Allowing our working neighbors to have a driving privilege

¹ State Laws Providing Access to Driver's Licenses or Cards, Regardless of Immigration Status, May 2017, <https://www.nilc.org/issues/drivers-licenses/state-laws-providing-dl-access/>

² The Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy's March, 2017 report, *Undocumented Immigrants' State and Local Tax Contribution* <http://www.itep.org/immigration/>

license/permit will not only ensure they are safe drivers but can promote additional work hours or job changes that can improve economic security for them and their families.

The Latino Policy Institute's comprehensive analysis of the effects of driver's licenses for undocumented residents in the states that allow it found that these states have lower traffic fatalities, lower cost of car insurance, and declining poverty rates. The Institute concludes that "issuing driver's licenses to undocumented Rhode Islanders will lead to safer roads and potentially better economic opportunities."³

Support for H-5518. This bill would establish health facilities, places of worship and schools as "sensitive locations" and would preclude personnel at these location from granting access to federal immigration authorities unless the authority presented a judicial warrant identifying a specific individual they were seeking for potential violation of immigration laws.

This is another public safety measure that is important to immigrants as well as all Rhode Islanders. As noted in the preamble: "A relationship of trust between Rhode Island's immigrant community and state and local agencies is central to the public safety of the people of Rhode Island". All Rhode Islanders should feel safe going to the doctor's office for primary and preventive care for themselves or their children. Our communal health depends on that. People in need of emergency and life-saving care should not feel hesitant about going to the hospital, nor should their family members fear accompanying them or visiting them. And we are all safer if all our neighbors do not fear cooperating with law enforcement and participating in court proceedings.

The proposed bill is similar to a memo from the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), promulgated prior to the current administration, which describes 'sensitive locations' at which its agents will not pursue routine enforcement of immigration laws. DHS was then concerned that enforcement activities didn't inadvertently cause public safety problems. Sadly, under the current administration that is no longer a driving concern. By enacting this bill, Rhode Island will be letting its residents know that it cares about and supports all those who live within its borders and that the well-being of immigrants is integral to the well-being of us all.

Support for H-5788. This bill would extend Family Court jurisdiction to immigrant youth age 18 – 21 who are abused, neglected or abandoned. It would afford these young adults who came to the U.S. and to Rhode Island to escape serious abuse by their parents, or who were abandoned or neglected by their family, to seek the protection of the Family Court to stabilize their lives and put them on a pathway to education and a job. Connecticut, Massachusetts, Maryland, New York, and Washington are among the states that have expanded the jurisdiction of their courts for this same population. While changes to the proposed bill may be necessary, we strongly urge the committee to ensure that the goal of providing protection for these very at-risk young people is realized.

³ A Legal and Policy Analysis of Drivers' Licenses for Undocumented Rhode Islanders, Roger Williams University School of Law and the Latino Policy Institute, June, 2016. https://www.rwu.edu/sites/default/files/downloads/lpi/drivers-license_report-legal.pdf