

July 29, 2020

The Hon. William J. Conley
3 Bridgham Court
Rumford, RI 02916

Dear Chairman Conley:

The undersigned organizations write to you as Chair of the Senate Finance Committee. We strongly urge passage of a critical provision in the Governor's proposed FY 2021 budget (Article 10, §16-7.2-6(i)(4)) which would extend the reimbursement funding currently available for School Resource Officers to mental and behavioral support staff for public schools. Particularly with the perspective of two defining events that have occurred during the first half of 2020 – the COVID-19 pandemic and the enormous public upswell of support for the reinvestment of law enforcement resources into more constructive and non-punitive community needs – it is critical that our state take action to ensure that students are being provided the mental and behavioral support they need.

In just the last few months, two lawsuits were filed against school districts in Rhode Island based on mistreatment of students by SROs. One case involves the unlawful arrest of a 13-year-old Black middle school honors student, and the other is on behalf of a special education student who was violently slammed to the ground and then arrested by an SRO merely for being disrespectful. Years of open records requests for information about school-based arrests have further documented how minor school infractions (such as wearing a hat in violation of the dress code) escalate into arrests for disorderly conduct solely because of the presence of an SRO, when the conduct could, and should, have been treated internally and more appropriately through restorative approaches.

The skills of counselors and mental health professionals are – and always have been – much more suited than police officers to the vulnerabilities and demographics of students within the Rhode Island public school system. Importantly, such staff carry a robust understanding of navigating age-appropriate behaviors without relying on punitive and sometimes violent responses. Although this is critical for all students, it is particularly necessary for Black and Indigenous students, students of color, students with disabilities, and LGBTQ+ students, whose populations are disproportionately affected by disciplinary and law enforcement protocols.

A concerted effort in increasing the number of mental and behavioral support staff – and reducing or eliminating the presence of SROs – will ensure that issues rooted in social, psychological, or academic problems are not inappropriately redefined into matters of criminal justice that promote the school-to-prison pipeline. Especially recognizing the support that students will need as they transition back into the classroom in the midst of both a global health crisis and a period of multiple nationally highlighted incidents of police brutality, an expansion of the hiring of mental and behavioral support staff has become even more critical for schools and students.

We therefore strongly urge inclusion of the Governor's proposal in the final version of the FY 2021 budget. The continued health of our communities depends upon it. Thank you for your consideration of this important matter.

Sincerely,

Steven Brown, Executive Director
American Civil Liberties Union of Rhode Island

Lauren D'Andrea, Clinical Supervisor
Community Health Worker Initiative

Laurie-Marie Pisciotta, Executive Director
Mental Health Association of Rhode Island

Beth Lamarre, Executive Director
National Alliance on Mental Illness Rhode Island

James McNulty, Executive Director
Oasis Wellness & Recovery Centers

Megan N. Clingham, Esq., Director
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Joanna Scocci, Executive Director
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Paige Clausius-Parks, Senior Policy Analyst
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Michelle Crossley, Board President
Rhode Island Mental Health Counselors Association

Samuel Salganik, Executive Director
Rhode Island Parent Information Network

Rhode Island Parity Stakeholders

Joanna Scocci, Director
The Arc Rhode Island Family Advocacy Network

Mavis Nimoh, Executive Director
The Center for Prisoner Health and Human Rights

Susan A. Storti, President/CEO
The Substance Use and Health Leadership Council of RI

cc: The Rhode Island State Senate Committee on Finance
The Hon. Dominick Ruggerio, President of the Senate
The Hon. Michael McCaffrey
The Hon. Dennis Algieri
The Hon. Chairwoman Hanna Gallo