



128 Dorrance Street, Suite 400
Providence, RI 02903
Phone: (401) 831-7171
Fax: (401) 831-7175
www.riaclu.org
info@riaclu.org

September 22, 2025

The Hon. Michael Forte
Chief Judge
R.I. Family Court
One Dorrance Plaza
Providence, RI 02903

Dear Chief Judge Forte:

I was recently talking with attorneys at R.I. Legal Services (RILS) and learned of a Family Court policy or practice that the ACLU of RI believes raises serious civil liberties concerns. I am writing in the hope that you can take prompt action to address and resolve it.

Specifically, it is our understanding that the Family Court clerk's office is requiring litigants to include their email address on the court cover sheet that must be completed incident to filing a complaint. For example, in a recent divorce case brought to our attention by RILS, the petitioner did not have an email account, so the attorney included her email address in that box. However, the filing was returned by the clerk's office with the explanation that the client "needs to have an email address of her own."

While we see nothing wrong with requesting litigants to provide their email address, I'm sure you can appreciate the problematic nature of making it a demand. For individuals who are represented by counsel, it would appear to be completely unnecessary and, in some cases – such as domestic violence-related complaints – potentially dangerous. And if the client simply does not have an email address, this requirement can be an insurmountable bar to their exercising their constitutional right to access the courts. We do not know if this requirement is imposed on *pro se* litigants as well, but if so, it is just as problematic.

With sufficient pushback, we were told, RILS attorneys are ultimately able to get their clients' cases filed. However, we are deeply concerned about the instances when other attorneys or petitioners may either fail to take those extra steps after having their complaint rejected or, instead, go through the potentially significant burden of establishing an email account just for this purpose. Because we believe this practice cannot be squared with a resident's constitutional right to court access, we request that you advise the clerk's office to no longer reject filings merely because the complainant fails to include an email address on their filing cover sheet.

Thank you in advance for your attention to this matter, and I look forward to hearing back from you about it.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Steven Brown". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first and last names being clearly legible.

Steven Brown
Executive Director

cc: Ron Pagliarini