

RHODE ISLAND CIVIL LIBERTIES

NEWSLETTER OF THE ACLU FOUNDATION OF RI

SUMMER 2026
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CRITICAL IMMIGRANT RIGHTS BILLS PASSED

But Rhode Island Legislative Session Ends without Passage of Other Key Bills

When the gavel to end the 2026 General Assembly session finally came down on June 11 at 11:59pm, the session concluded on a generally favorable note for civil liberties, although the session could perhaps most be noted for what *didn't* happen than for what did.

On the positive side, the legislature finally passed a critical immigrant rights bill that the ACLU of RI, the immigration bar, and numerous community groups made a priority this year that will help protect immigrants from unjust deportations. Before their passage, we also obtained significant amendments to other bills we were monitoring, including strengthening open government provisions in the law creating the position of Inspector General; adding privacy protections to the extension of a pilot program allowing the use of automated cameras for “block the box” traffic violations; and preventing the weakening of physician authority to prescribe opioids in treating patients with a variety of serious medical conditions.

In addition, the ACLU of RI successfully lobbied against the passage of numerous bills that undercut criminal justice reform. And a handful of other troubling Senate-approved bills that we opposed — including ones making “squatting” on abandoned property a crime, allowing “disruptive” children to be removed from the classroom without due process, and making it a crime to release the names of people involved in fatal railroad accidents — all died in the House.

Less positively, however, the General Assembly failed to tackle two key issues that have taken on prominence and urgency during the Trump administration. First, legislators left for consideration for next year a critical bill to strengthen state voting rights in response to the U.S. Supreme Court’s decimation of the federal Voting Rights Act. *Continued on p. 3*

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Protecting the Medical Privacy of RI Transgender Youth

In May, the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) tried to enforce a subpoena to obtain the sensitive private medical records of youth who have received medical treatment for gender dysphoria at Rhode Island Hospital. The ACLU of RI and the Lawyers’ Committee for RI took swift action on behalf of the RI Child Advocate — the state official tasked with protecting children in foster care — by filing a motion to quash (or void) the subpoena. Our motion to quash was granted, and the DOJ is currently prevented from receiving any of these medical records from the hospital.

Amazingly, however, the subpoena against the hospital was issued by a Trump-friendly federal judge in *Texas*, and he has required RI Hospital to turn over anonymized and de-identified records to the Texas court (not the DOJ). In the meantime, the Rhode Island case is also proceeding in the federal appeals court in Boston.

Amazingly, the subpoena against the hospital was issued by a Trump-friendly federal judge in Texas, not in Rhode Island.

We will continue fighting to protect medical privacy and the right to bodily autonomy without government intimidation. You can read a full timeline of this jurisdictionally complicated case at www.riaclu.org/timelineDOJsubpoena.

FROM THE DESK OF THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

We may be turning the page on this year's legislative session, but not without a moment to celebrate the protections for immigrant Rhode Islanders that were enacted into law this year.

After six years of collaboration with our coalition partners, volunteers, attorneys, community advocates and legislators, the "364 day" bill was one of a trio of immigrant-protective bills that has become law. It will help immigrants, including lawful permanent residents, receive more equal treatment under the law by ensuring that simple misdemeanor offenses do not immediately trigger deportation consequences.

Read more about other important bills that did and didn't pass on p. 4!

Yet while the legislature was in session, the rest of our work continued, including whirlwind legal action to protect the medical records of trans youth in the state from the prying eyes of the DOJ.

Now we're gearing up to spread Know Your Rights materials for the upcoming elections, getting a head start strategizing for next year's legislative session, and planning our upcoming summer and fall events.

Thanks for being with us through all of this, season after season, and session after session.

— Steven Brown

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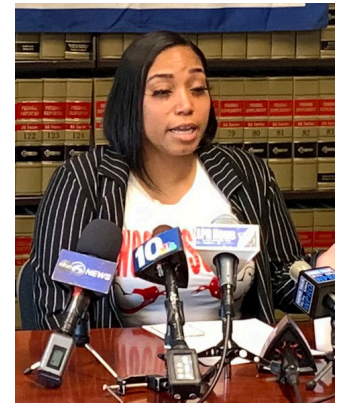
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ACLU OF RI CASE UPDATES

ACLU of RI Settles Case of Pawtucket Student Unlawfully Handcuffed, Arrested by School Resource Officer

Seven years after a Pawtucket school resource officer (SRO) unlawfully handcuffed and arrested an African American and Native American middle school honors student, the case has been settled with an award of monetary damages to the student and an agreement by the City to work to revise its incident reporting system to make it easier to track police interactions in the city's schools. The lawsuit against the school was handled by ACLU of RI cooperating attorney Shannah Kurland.

In June 2019, the ACLU's client (cited as "T.J." in the lawsuit) and another student got into a scuffle in the Goff Middle School schoolyard before the school day started. It was quickly broken up by other students, and neither student was hurt. However, the SRO, who was not present for the incident but watched a video of it, decided to arrest T.J. for "disorderly conduct." T.J. was handcuffed, taken to the police station, and kept in a cell for close to an hour before being released to her mother. The charge was disposed of when the matter went before the city's juvenile hearing board, and despite the arrest, both girls involved were given only a two-day school suspension.



T.J.'s mother at a press conference in 2020

The ACLU of RI has been raising concerns for years about how SROs often escalate minor disciplinary incidents into major ones and turn routine school infractions into criminal matters, unnecessarily introducing children to the criminal justice system at an early age and scarring them in the process.

Four "Friend of the Court" Briefs Filed in Support of Rhode Island Latino Arts, Free Speech

More than a dozen organizations have joined in four "friend of the court" briefs in support of the National ACLU and ACLU of Rhode Island's legal challenge to a certification requirement that the National Endowment for the Arts imposed last year on grant applicants. The NEA grant guidelines, which were found by U.S. District Court Judge William Smith to violate the First Amendment, required applicants to attest that they would not "promote gender ideology," and blocked any projects that purportedly did so from getting an award.

The government appealed the ruling to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the First Circuit. The four briefs filed in that court in support of RI Latino Arts' position were submitted by a range of impacted parties:

- The National Coalition Against Censorship
- The American Association of Physicians for Human Rights, joined by five other professional organizations that support the LGBTQ+ community in healthcare, research, social services, and other areas
- Seven scholars who specialize in the First Amendment
- The Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression

LEGISLATIVE SESSION REPORT *cont'd from p. 1*

Legislators also took no action on two bills aiming to protect the state's LGBTQ+ community from the federal government's attacks on their privacy rights. This was especially disheartening in light of the subpoena recently served on Rhode Island Hospital to turn over sensitive medical records of minors being treated for gender dysphoria. *Read more about that case on p. 1.*

A number of other ACLU-promoted bills also died, including our legislation barring police from interrogating juveniles in custody without a parent or attorney present; reinstating police traffic stops data collection; regulating automated license plate readers; and establishing privacy protections for student home use of school computers.

On the whole, though, civil liberties prevailed. Inside, you will find more detailed summaries of these and other key bills from the session. You can find even more information, including our written testimony on more than 100 bills, on our website at www.riaclu.org/legislation. Also included in this newsletter is a 2025-2026 legislative voting record providing information on how your legislators voted on some key civil liberties issues over the past two years.

Finally, we hope you will join us on **Wednesday, July 15** for a Legislative Wrap-Up where we will review the 2026 session in depth. *Find more information about the event on our website at www.riaclu.org/events.*

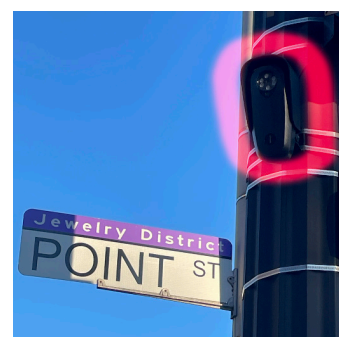
ACLU OF RI WORK AT THE STATE AND LOCAL LEVEL

BODY-WORN CAMERA REGULATIONS The ACLU has expressed strong objections to proposed **Department of Public Safety** revisions to the state's body-worn camera (BWC) regulations involving serious "use of force" incidents. The rules currently bar police officers from reviewing their BWC footage in such cases until they have provided a formal recorded statement summarizing the incident. This is designed to ensure that an officer's recollection and explanation of what happened is not tainted by a review of the footage. Under the proposal, however, this safeguard would be eliminated, prompting the ACLU's submission of testimony urging rejection of the revisions.

GOVERNMENT TRANSPARENCY In an important victory for public participation, the **Judicial Nominating Commission**, which screens candidates for judicial positions, has reversed its policy requiring members of the public to sign up two weeks in advance if they wish to speak at a meeting about judicial candidates. After the ACLU called on the Commission to revise this unnecessarily lengthy sign-up deadline for public comment, the JNC has changed its practice to allow individuals to request to speak up to a day before a hearing.

TECH PRIVACY The ACLU's battle against the proliferation of Flock Safety Automated License Plate Reader (ALPR) cameras across the state continues. After we sent a letter to the **Little Compton Town Council** urging them to reject the police chief's request to install the cameras, community members chimed in as well, leading the Council to indefinitely table the issue, with the police chief stating he would not pursue the technology further.

In the meantime, the **Tiverton Town Council** approved a \$23,000 budget item to be spent on Flock cameras, but after consistent public outcry, the council decided to ask the police department to return and give another presentation on the proposed cameras. Less positively, the **Lincoln Town Council** has approved \$45,400 to be spent on installing 12 Flock cameras in the 19-square-mile town. *If you see information about Flock or other ALPR cameras on your city or town council's agenda, let us know!*



Flock camera in Providence

FREE SPEECH We submitted testimony to the **Rhode Island Board of Elections** with concerns about a proposed regulation that would extend the state's current "50-foot electioneering" ban, which bans political activity at least 50 feet outside polling places on election day. The proposal would apply this ban to the *three weeks* of early voting at city and town halls. The ACLU objected to this lengthy ban's impact on the exercise of free speech rights outside of a building that is a key location for protest against politicians and government policies. Legislation to impose such a ban was defeated in the General Assembly this year.

WHAT HAPPENED IN THE RI LEGISLATIVE SESSION

It's a wrap for the 2026 Rhode Island legislative session. It turned out that most of the bills the ACLU of RI spent the greatest amount of time working on — both good and bad — died in committee, though a few positive ones made it to the finish line. Read on to learn about a selection of these bills, if they passed or died, and whether the ACLU of RI was in favor of 👍 or against 🗑️ the result. For more in-depth information on these and many other bills, go to www.riaclu.org/legislation.

IMMIGRANTS' RIGHTS

This issue was the one key area where the General Assembly stepped up to address the havoc and danger being spread by the Trump administration.

"364 Day Bill" (H 7198A, S 2047A) – PASSED 👍

This key immigrant reform bill changes the maximum prison sentence for a misdemeanor offense from one year to 364 days. It addresses a conflict between federal immigration law and Rhode Island law: under federal law, offenses that carry a sentence of one year or more could subject immigrants to automatic deportation. Dropping a misdemeanor's maximum sentence by one day in Rhode Island ensures that these individuals, including lawful permanent residents, are not subject to extremely harsh immigration penalties. After six years of ACLU advocacy for this legislation, both chambers passed the bill, sponsored by Sen. Jonathon Acosta and Rep. Leonela Felix, into law.

Immigrant Protection Legislation (H 7360Aam, S 2045Aam; H 7202, S 2605) – PASSED 👍

Two other bills of note to protect the immigrant community also were enacted into law. One generally restricts civil arrests at or around courthouses, and a second bill allows individuals to sue federal agents in state court for violations of their constitutional rights.



Some members of the RI Immigrant Coalition in the State House after the "364 Day" bill passed at the end of the session.

STUDENTS' RIGHTS

"Disruptive Student" Classroom Removals

(H 7526, S 2524) – DIED IN HOUSE 🗑️

The ACLU has consistently raised concerns about the disproportionate impact of school discipline on students of color, students with disabilities, and LGBTQ+ students. That is one reason we opposed this legislation that would have increased the ability to remove students from the classroom for "disruptive behavior," and to do so in a way that skirted their rights to due process. After passing the Senate, the bill was held for further study in the House.

GENDER EQUALITY

Domestic Worker Protections

(H 8504, S 2921) – PASSED 👍

In an important victory for vulnerable populations, the state's key anti-discrimination labor law will no longer contain an exemption for domestic workers, thanks to the passage of this legislation. The people who engage in domestic work — mostly women, people of color, and immigrants — were, until now, devoid of legal protection under the state's Fair Employment Practices Act.

FIRST AMENDMENT RIGHTS

Social Media Bans

(S 2968, H 7746, H 7953) – DIED IN COMMITTEE 🗑️

While the ACLU appreciates concerns raised about the effect of social media on minors, we opposed three bills that would have either barred or required express parental consent for them to access social media platforms. The bills, all of which died in committee, would have directly impacted First Amendment rights, hindered children's ability to find community online, and presented genuine privacy concerns for all Rhode Islanders regardless of age.

Expansion of Electioneering Ban

(H 7572, S 2131) – DIED IN SENATE 🗑️

State law currently bans "electioneering" within 50 feet of a polling place on Election Day. This bill would lengthen that ban to the *three weeks* before Election Day at the places where early voting occurs — city and town halls. We argued that stifling political speech for such a long period of time in front of the buildings that are core forums for free speech activity raised serious concerns. The bill died in the Senate after passing the House.

VOTING RIGHTS

Voting Rights Act

(H 8334, S 3143) – DIED IN COMMITTEE 🗳️

Joining with a coalition of more than 40 organizations, we strongly supported legislation to establish a state voting rights act largely based on, but expanding, the federal Voting Rights Act of 1965. Action at the state level is essential in order to preserve the fundamental right to vote in light of a series of U.S. Supreme Court decisions that have gutted the federal law. In one of the great disappointments of the session, the legislation died in the final days after the Attorney General belatedly raised numerous dubious concerns about the bill.



OPEN GOVERNMENT

Making Traffic Accident Data Public

(H 7576, S 2480) – PASSED 👍

Despite the fact that more than 40 other states make traffic accident data public, the state had refrained from doing so, wrongly claiming that federal law barred disclosure of this information. The data can be extremely useful in helping shape better public policy to make our roads safer. That information will now be available as a result of passage of this legislation.

Inspector General (H 8562, S 3327A) – PASSED 👍

Given that transparency and accountability are a critical part of the work of the new position of Inspector General, we promoted amendments that would strengthen transparency in the IG's office itself. Our suggestions were incorporated into the final version of this legislation that was ultimately included in the budget.

Railroad Crash Secrecy

(H 8296, S 2599) – DIED IN HOUSE 🗳️

Legislation making it a crime to release any police report, and any communications between railroad employees, involving a railroad fatality died in the House after passing the Senate. We opposed this secrecy effort, noting that there was a strong public interest in access to this information following such a critical safety incident.

PRIVACY

Automated License Plate Readers

(H 8077) – DIED IN COMMITTEE 🗳️

Automated license plate readers take photos of each license plate that passes by them, and they are stored in a vast database network accessible by police departments across the country, making it easy to track people for questionable purposes, including immigration enforcement and monitoring protesters. This legislation, which would have reined in their use, died in committee.

School Computer Privacy

(H 7032, S 2786) – DIED IN SENATE 🗳️

Distributing laptops to students in public schools for home use is now commonplace. Yet students have virtually no privacy protections when they use these computers, as school administrators often have blanket access to the laptop's microphone and camera. This important privacy legislation, sponsored by Rep. June Speakman, would greatly limit remote access to the computers by school officials, but for the fourth year in a row the bill died in the Senate after passing the House.

“Block the Box” (H 7437am, S 3228am) – PASSED 👍

On the positive side, some important privacy amendments pushed by the ACLU and Sen. Dawn Euer were incorporated into legislation extending the “Don’t Block the Box” traffic violation pilot program for three years. The amendments ensure that the data generated by these systems cannot be used for tracking purposes or shared by the municipality without a warrant.



Opioid Prescriptions (H 7923A, S 3259A) – PASSED 👍

Legislation revising the standards for the prescribing of opioids was amended to reflect our concerns after we noted that it would significantly circumscribe a doctor's ability to use their professional judgment to provide this medication for chronic and intractable pain and other serious illnesses.



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Special thanks to last year's **Constitutional Champion** sponsor of our 2025 Annual Meeting! If you want to be a 2026 Annual Meeting sponsor, contact Monica at development@riaclu.org.

CRIMINAL JUSTICE

Chipping Away at “Fair Chance Licensing” Protections

(H 7922, S 2857; H 7030B, S 2107A; H 7127A, Budget Article 12, Section 6) – PASSED 🗳️

Three bills weakening the impact of the Fair Chance Licensing Act passed this session. That law ensures that formerly incarcerated individuals are generally not barred from obtaining state occupational licenses based solely on their criminal record when they are otherwise qualified for the profession. This year, the General Assembly passed legislation at odds with this protection for a handful of licenses in the healthcare setting. The ACLU will be working next year to prevent any further backsliding.



Criminal Sentencing Bills – PASSED 🗳️

Regrettably, no session would be complete without passage of a few ACLU-opposed bills that get “tough on crime.” The damage was relatively meager this year, however. The General Assembly approved gratuitous legislation making it unlawful for a person in the custody of the Department of Corrections to use “any force” to resist a lawful directive of a correctional officer. (H 8463A, S 2733A) We opposed another enacted bill that creates enhanced sentencing penalties for violating traffic laws while engaged in vaguely defined “road rage” activities. (H 8384A, S 3169Aam)

Criminal Sentencing Bills – DIED IN COMMITTEE 🙅

On the other hand, a number of bills that would have significantly enhanced prison penalties for a variety of conduct that is already illegal — including reckless driving, threatening school employees, and assaulting school referees or railroad workers — all died in committee following ACLU opposition (Driving Offenses – S 3102, S 2493, H 8100; School Employees – H 7552, S 2957; Sports officials – H 7549, S 2316; Railroad Workers – H 8432, S 3164).

Rights of the Homeless (S 2481am, H 8000A) – DIED 🗳️ 🙅

The General Assembly took no action on two opposing bills addressing the state’s unhoused population. We lobbied against legislation that would have made it a crime punishable by a year in prison for a person to occupy a dwelling unit, including abandoned property, without permission. The bill passed the Senate but died in the House. On the other hand, a protective bill supported by the ACLU that would have required police to give 20 days notice before raiding homeless encampments died in the Senate after passing the House.

LGBTQ+ PRIVACY

Legislators failed to pass two bills designed to protect the state’s LGBTQ+ community from the federal government’s relentless attacks on their rights. The importance of these bills took on greater urgency after Rhode Island Hospital was hit with a federal subpoena demanding access to the medical records of minors treated for gender dysphoria at the hospital. Both of these bills will be resubmitted next year.

Reproductive and Gender Affirming Healthcare Data Privacy (H 7357A, S 2992) – DIED IN SENATE 🗳️

In an effort to protect reproductive and gender-affirming healthcare data from prying eyes, this bill would have limited the dissemination and sale of certain consumer health data without the person’s consent. The bill, sponsored by Rep. Jason Knight, passed the House but died in the Senate.

Prescription Drug Monitoring Program

(H 8318, S 2889A) – DIED IN HOUSE 🗳️

A second, related bill, which passed the Senate only to die in the House, would have halted the reporting of testosterone prescriptions to the state-run Prescription Drug Monitoring Program in order to prevent federal access to this information.

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

Because artificial intelligence is rapidly expanding, establishing safeguards surrounding its use — to guard against discrimination and bias in its application, to promote informed consent, and to prevent breaches of privacy — is vital. In that regard, the ACLU supported legislation that was enacted, requiring that patients be notified if AI is being used in note-taking to memorialize their healthcare visit. (H 7538A, S 2570A). We also obtained amendments to another enacted law governing the use of AI in mental health treatment, by narrowing its scope to avoid potential First Amendment issues in its application (H 7349A, S 2197Aam). We raised a number of concerns about a third bill, which passed the Senate but died in the House, that would have established weak safeguards for the use of AI in healthcare insurance benefit determinations (S 2010A).

KNOW YOUR VOTING RIGHTS



It’s primary election season! Go to www.riaclu.org/vote for info about who can vote; voter ID; and what to do if you have problems at the polls.

WE'RE HIRING: OUTREACH & ENGAGEMENT COORDINATOR

We're hiring an Outreach and Engagement Coordinator to help develop and implement non-partisan advocacy campaign organizing strategies to help advance our mission, build relationships with community partners, and mobilize ACLU supporters across Rhode Island.

If you, or someone you know, is interested in working for the ACLU of RI, take a look at the job description on our website at www.riaclu.org/jobs or by scanning the QR code.



HOST A SOCIAL GATHERING TO SUPPORT THE ACLU OF RI!

A fun and social way to support our work protecting rights in Rhode Island is to host a casual fundraiser. Here are reflections from Karen Ziner, an ACLU of RI member and supporter, who hosted a house party fundraiser last fall:

Hosting a house party fundraiser for the RI ACLU fulfilled a sense of purpose for me and others who attended. And, we had food, fun and music! Steve Brown, the executive director, urged us all not to feel hopeless in these times of democracy under threat. We raised more than \$2,500. Equally important was Steve's summary of ACLU wins, losses and ongoing challenges in Rhode Island and nationally.

A house party is a terrific way to educate and involve people, and raise money all at once. I am lining up friends to do the same. Many thanks to Steve and Monica, ACLU of RI's development coordinator, whose assistance made this possible.



Steven Brown, executive director, speaks to house party attendees

If you'd like to host a social gathering to support our mission — as a fundraiser, membership event, or to simply spread the word about our work protecting civil liberties — reach out to Monica at msmith@riaclu.org or 401-831-7171!

RECAPPING RECOGNITIONS & EVENTS

AANHPI MONTH AWARD

The ACLU of RI received a Statehouse award from Senators Linda Ujifusa and Victoria Gu in celebration of Asian American, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander Heritage Month in recognition of the Affiliate's work in support of the AANHPI community.

COMMUNITY ADVOCACY AWARD

In May, the ACLU Foundation of RI and our executive director

were chosen to receive one of Eastern Bank Foundation's Community Advocacy Awards, which recognizes leaders and organizations whose work addresses some of the most pressing needs in the communities the bank serves. Thank you to the Eastern Bank Foundation!



June 20: ACLU's table at Providence PrideFest was busy all day



May 18: Writing Postcards to Legislators event in Cranston





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RETURN SERVICE REQUESTED

New laws have passed in Rhode Island, and legal cases are evolving every week.
We're responding to it all to protect and defend your civil liberties.

If you'd like to help us continue our work of protecting and defending civil liberties across Rhode Island, consider making a special tax-deductible gift:

MAIL A DONATION

Mail a check made out to
"ACLU Foundation of RI" to:

ACLU Foundation of Rhode Island
128 Dorrance Street, Suite 400
Providence, RI 02903

or

MAKE A GIFT ONLINE

Scan the QR code with your phone camera to make a one-time gift or set up a recurring donation, or go to: www.riaclu.org/donate



IN THIS ISSUE:

The Rhode Island Legislative Session has ended! Read about the wins, losses, and missed opportunities in the session on p. 4