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ACLU OF RI POSITION: OPPOSE

COMMENTS IN OPPOSITION TO 23-H 5299, RELATING TO EDUCATION – MAINTENANCE OF ORDER ON CAMPUS April 17, 2023

The ACLU of Rhode Island opposes this legislation, which would arm campus police officers in the state's public colleges and universities, regardless of the decisions made by the leadership of each collegiate institution.

Under current law, every public institution is able to set their own policy for arming their officers. Currently, the University of Rhode Island has taken advantage of this and arms its campus police. Both the Community College of Rhode Island and Rhode Island College have, to this point, decided that arming their campus police is not in the best interest of their respective campuses. For the reasons expressed below, the ACLU believes that no campus police should be armed, but that at a minimum, it is not a decision that should be mandated by the General Assembly.

There is a tremendous danger inherent in introducing guns to college campuses. While there is always a hypothetical situation in which campus law enforcement officers could benefit from being armed, it is a certainty that introducing weapons to college campuses brings with it the very real danger of accidental discharges and tragic cases of misunderstandings and misidentifications. This should be carefully considered before any action regarding bringing guns to campus is undertaken. Indeed, each institution has done precisely that, and reached their respective conclusions on the matter.

We also note that this bill would provide campus police officers with all of the procedural and substantive protections provided by the Law Enforcement Officers' Bill of Rights (LEOBOR). While the legislation requires these officers to undergo certain levels of training, it falls short of the training required for municipal police departments. As this committee is well aware, there is tremendous concern about LEOBOR and the way it makes it difficult for police departments to discipline officers who have engaged in misconduct. Now is not the time to be expanding LEOBOR's privileges to even more individuals.

In sum, in light of the safety concerns regarding arming campus officers, we believe that requiring the state's institutions of higher education to have armed officers is unwise and inappropriate and should be rejected. We also object to providing these officers, who have not necessarily undergone the same level and amount of training as other police, with the myriad benefits of LEOBOR at a time when there is a growing consensus that LEOBOR reform is essential. Thank you for considering our views.