

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE ACLU FOUNDATION OF RI

MODEST WINS, LOST OPPORTUNITIES MARK 2025 LEGISLATIVE SESSION

Immigrants' Rights, Justice Reform, Free Speech, and more

Some important wins for civil liberties, but also lost opportunities for bigger ones, were the end result of this year's General Assembly session.

The wins included passage of the "Freedom to Read Act," a bill that will protect public and school libraries from censorship; anti-discrimination bills for immigrants seeking health care or housing; the repeal of punitive laws that targeted sex workers; and new protections against racial discrimination based on hair style or texture. The Affiliate also helped defeat a long list of dangerous and regressive crime bills, including ones significantly increasing the criminal penalties for various crimes and a troubling proposal that would have placed the state's independent crime lab under the control of the Attorney General.

It was what didn't pass that was most disappointing. Once again, an attempt at comprehensive open records reform died in committee. Privacy protections for our digital data that can be used to determine if we're seeking reproductive or gender-affirming health care did not pass. A bill reinstating a law to shine a light on racial disparities in police traffic stops was unceremoniously killed in Senate committee after passing the House. And a bill tweaking the law so that lawful immigrants would not face automatic deportation for minor offenses died in the House after passing the Senate. A ray of hope is that many of our priority bills passed either the House or the Senate, important (if only half-way) shows of support that will help when we reengage with them next year.

The full recap of some of the most important bills from the session can be found on page 5.

VICTORY: ACLU of RI Settles False Arrest Suit of Woonsocket Man for \$550,000

Concluding a lawsuit involving serious police misconduct, the ACLU of Rhode Island has favorably settled a case on behalf of Woonsocket resident Mack Blackie who was twice falsely arrested by Woonsocket police, and criminally charged and incarcerated for crimes he did not commit. The City has agreed to pay \$550,000 to settle the case, which was handled by ACLU of RI cooperating attorneys Joshua Xavier and Chloe Davis. The Affiliate expressed hope that the large settlement will serve as a deterrent to similar acts of police misconduct.

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In August 2022, the resident of an apartment break-in, William Grover, told Woonsocket Police Officer Timothy Hammond that the perpetrator was a person known to him as "Black." He explicitly advised that Mack Blackie was *not* the perpetrator. Officer Hammond nonetheless falsely wrote in his witness statement that "Grover positively identified the suspect male as being Mack Blackie," and also obtained a warrant on that basis.

As a result, Mr. Blackie was arrested twice (he was released once after he collapsed from medical complications in the courthouse), and was wrongly incarcerated for 31 days. It was only when Grover saw Blackie in the courthouse hallway at a pre-trial conference in the case, and alerted the prosecutor that the Woonsocket Police had arrested the wrong man, that the charges were dropped. Hammond was suspended for 10 days, but remains on the force.

FROM THE DESK OF THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

It's impossible to talk about civil liberties and not discuss the critical moment we are in as a country. While it feels exhausting to be in continuously unprecedented times, I encourage you to take a look through this issue of our newsletter to see the tireless work we are doing to protect your rights, and the rights of *all* Rhode Islanders — and the many wins we've achieved in the past few months thanks to your support.

That was certainly true of this year's recently-ended legislative session. While many of our priority bills will not become law this year, we had a handful of important wins that will protect our libraries from censorship, prevent discrimination against our immigrant neighbors, and improve our ability to vote by mail.

And our lawsuits against the Trump Administration's unconstitutional actions continue, covering issues from the arts to domestic violence prevention to housing. Similarly, we're working locally in the courts to ensure our government is transparent at every level, from our school districts to the State House.

I hope you will find within these pages some inspiration, hope, resilience — whatever you may need more of these days. Thank you for being a part of our community that continues to show up against injustices, in big and small ways.

— Steven Brown

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ACLU/RI v. TRUMP: CASE UPDATES

Working with other groups, the ACLU of RI is involved in three major lawsuits challenging various unconstitutional conditions that have been imposed by the Trump Administration on non-profit organizations seeking federal grants that promote housing, the arts, and work against domestic violence. A restraining order has already been issued in one of the cases, and decisions are expected in the other two at any time. The lawsuits and their status are described below.

Judge Grants Temporary Restraining Order, Blocking Trump Administration's Unlawful Restrictions on Housing and Health Grants

A nationwide coalition of housing, sexual assault, youth and domestic violence organizations obtained a temporary restraining order in July in a suit challenging the Trump Administration's placement of sweeping and unlawful conditions on grant funding from the U.S. Departments of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and Health and Human Services (HHS). In response to the suit, U.S. District Court Judge Melissa DuBose issued the order that bars implementation of the conditions for the time being.



The coalition, which includes six Rhode Island organizations that provide these critical services across the state, asked the court to block the administration from enforcing requirements that push grantees to restrict or deny diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts, censor support for transgender individuals, and certify compliance with broad anti-equity mandates, or else face severe penalties, including criminal liability under the federal False Claims Act. In some programs, the administration has also barred grantees from “promoting elective abortions” in any way.

Created and authorized by Congress, grants from the affected programs — such as the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act and the Violence Against Women Act — have long provided critical support to organizations that serve survivors, families, youth, and people experiencing homelessness. Through politically motivated funding conditions, the suit argues, the Trump administration is undermining Congress's clear intent, threatening the effectiveness of these programs, and jeopardizing services that vulnerable communities across the country depend on.

The six Rhode Island organizational plaintiffs in the case are the House of Hope Community Development Corporation, Community Care Alliance, Foster Forward, Rhode Island Coalition to End Homelessness, the R.I. Coalition Against Domestic Violence, and Haus of Codec. Additional proceedings in the case are expected to take place soon.

RI Coalition Against Domestic Violence Seeks Injunction Against Trump Administration Grant Requirements

In a separate but related lawsuit, the ACLU of RI and others are representing the Rhode Island Coalition Against Domestic Violence (RICADV) and a nationwide group of 16 other state domestic violence and sexual assault coalitions in seeking a preliminary injunction against a host of unlawful grant restrictions issued by the Department of Justice's Office on Violence Against Women (OVW). The arguments for the injunction were laid out in a 49-page memorandum, which states that the "new funding conditions are unconstitutional several times over."

The memo claims the new funding conditions violate the Administrative Procedure Act — a law that prohibits "arbitrary and capricious" federal agency actions — and the First Amendment by "seeking to silence disfavored speech." The lawsuit further alleges that the new restrictions make it impossible for many of the service providers to operate critical safety programs effectively, and threaten to eliminate services that victims of violence rely on across the country.

Critically, many of the requirements for grant funding are in direct contradiction to the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA), which is comprehensive federal legislation that addresses domestic violence and sexual assault, and codifies the requirements for victim services and prevention efforts.

Among other restrictions, the new requirements for grant funding bar RICADV and the other organizational plaintiffs from promoting "gender ideology" or any diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programs "that do not advance the policy of equal dignity and respect." The organizations are also barred from engaging in "activities that frame domestic violence or sexual assault as systemic social justice issues rather than criminal offenses" even though, the brief argues, VAWA's "foundational recognition" is "that domestic violence is a systemic issue."

The suit was filed by attorneys from the ACLU of RI and the Lawyers' Committee for RI, as well as Democracy Forward, Jacobson Lawyers Group, and the National Women's Law Center. U.S. District Judge William Smith is expected to imminently issue a ruling on the plaintiffs' request for a preliminary injunction.



Lawyers, plaintiffs, and supporters after a hearing in *RICADV v. Bondi*.

Arts Organizations Argue in Court that "Gender Ideology" Is Still Unconstitutionally Penalized by National Endowment for the Arts

In yet a third related case, on behalf of R.I. Latino Arts and three other arts organizations, the ACLU has asked a federal court to definitively rule that the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) is violating the Constitution and federal law in its implementation of an executive order that prohibits federal funding for grants that promote "gender ideology." If the ACLU's motion is granted, the suit could be resolved without trial. In March, the judge preliminarily found that the organizations were likely to succeed on their legal claims.



Lead plaintiff Rhode Island Latino Arts' (RILA) recent free outdoor theater series. Actors L-R: Ashley Soto and Alexander Crespo Rosario. Courtesy of Marta V. Martinez, RILA.

The motion was filed after the NEA admitted that it would judge projects based on whether they "promote" what the government deems to be "gender ideology," and after it reinstated a requirement that grant applicants agree to abide by all other executive orders issued by President Trump when applying for a grant.

ACLU of RI cooperating attorney Lynette Labinger is working with the National ACLU on the lawsuit on behalf of Rhode Island Latino Arts and three outside arts organizations: National Queer Theater, The Theater Offensive, and the Theatre Communications Group.

2025 LEGISLATIVE SESSION RECAP

Another legislative session over, another year that protections for civil liberties took some steps forward and a few steps back. Here are some of the more significant civil liberties-related bills, both good and bad, that passed or died this year. To read more about them, and about other legislation from this session, go to riaclu.org/bills.

Good Bills that Passed

FIRST AMENDMENT Freedom to Read (H 5726A, S 238B)

Passage of the “Freedom to Read Act” was a major victory for First Amendment rights. In support of the role of libraries in a democratic society, as well as the core First Amendment right of intellectual freedom, the new law provides strong protections to librarians to fulfill their mission without the fear of censorship. A large coalition of advocates worked vigorously to get the bill enacted into law.



Group photo of advocates and legislators after the Freedom to Read bill passed.

RACIAL JUSTICE Hairstyle Discrimination (H 5841, S 519)

There have been numerous instances across the country where employees are told their hair is not “professional” enough for the workplace, or students are disciplined for having hair considered “distracting.” These actions often target hairstyles closely tied to racial identity, particularly among Blacks. That’s why we strongly supported legislation, now enacted into law, that expands the definition of race in Rhode Island’s anti-discrimination statutes to include traits historically associated with race, such as hair texture and protective hairstyles.



PRIVACY Newborn Screening (H 5495, S 686)

In a win for privacy, this law provides for the confidentiality of newborn screening test specimens and classifies that data as protected health information. A newborn’s DNA contains not only information about the newborn, but also their family, and can reveal a wide array of personal information. While conducting these tests to aid in early detection and treatment of various medical disorders is undoubtedly important, protecting these screenings and their results as confidential health



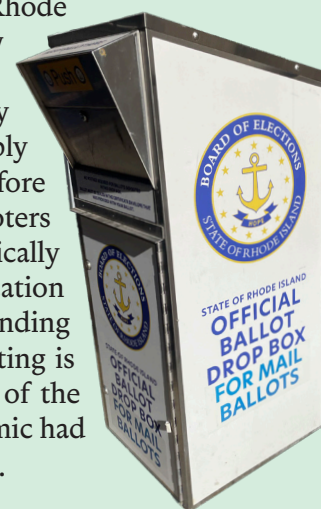
information is just as critical.

WORKERS' RIGHTS Menopause Accommodations (H 6161, S 361)

We strongly supported this legislation which requires employers to provide reasonable accommodations for employees experiencing menopause and menopause-related symptoms. We are hopeful that this new law will remove the stigma surrounding menopause in the workplace and ensure that employees are not penalized for going through this natural process.

VOTING RIGHTS Mail Ballot Applications (H 5709, S 520)

In a win for voting access, Rhode Island voters can now automatically receive a mail ballot application every election, rather than reapply for one at each election. Before this change, only certain voters could request to automatically receive a mail ballot application for every election. Expanding access to this method of voting is especially welcome in light of the impact the Covid-19 pandemic had on voters’ use of mail ballots.



Good Bills that Passed, cont'd

IMMIGRANTS' RIGHTS Pro-Immigrant Legislation

(H 6244A, S 269; H 5674, S 274)

Two important pieces of legislation protecting Rhode Island's immigrant community became law this session. The first law prohibits healthcare personnel from asking about the legal immigration status of any patient. The second law bars landlords from inquiring about a tenant or prospective tenant's immigration or citizenship status. In both instances, inquiries like these are often a proxy for discriminating against individuals based on their appearance, surname, ethnicity, or race. We are hopeful that these laws will better ensure equal access to healthcare services and housing for all Rhode Islanders.

JUSTICE REFORM Pro-Sex Worker Legislation

(H 5348A, S 269; H 5357, S 296; H 5358Aam, S 278A)

Now signed into law, we strongly supported three pieces of legislation addressing the rights of sex workers. One bill repealed a law that singled out individuals convicted of sex work offenses for mandatory HIV testing. A second one repealed a law imposing a special court fine solely on individuals convicted of prostitution-related offenses. The third law provides sex workers immunity from prosecution under certain circumstances when they have been the victim of crimes. The ACLU had recommended introduction of these laws three years ago before a state commission that examined reform of the prostitution laws.

Bad Bills that Passed 🗨️

FIRST AMENDMENT Explicit Digital Images (H 5046, S 136)

As juvenile and inadvisable as it is to use artificial intelligence to create sexually explicit, but fake, digital images, this bill criminalizes the dissemination of such images in a variety of contexts. It raises numerous First Amendment concerns by not requiring any intent to harm a person who was the subject of the fake image and by potentially applying to satirical content. Our request to Governor Dan McKee to veto this legislation did not succeed.

FIRST AMENDMENT "Political Deepfakes" in Elections

(H 5872A, S 816A)

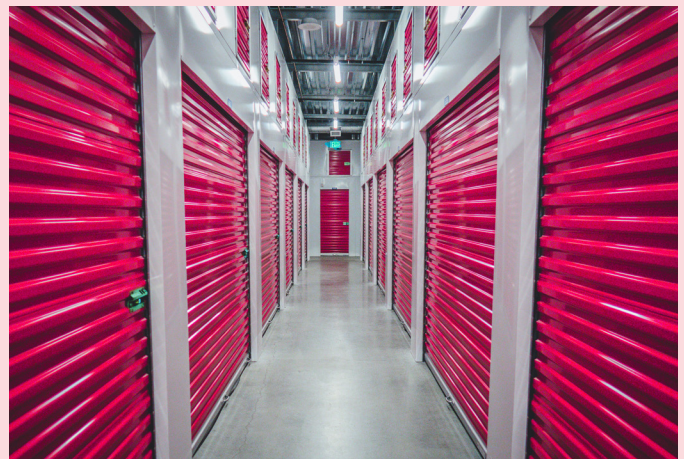
This new law ventures into regulating the new world of artificial intelligence in the electoral process by requiring detailed disclaimers when political ads make use of AI. We argued that it verges too far in regulating political speech. For example, we noted that the law could allow a politician to obtain a court order barring a rival candidate's political ads using AI if it created a "fundamentally different impression" of the challenged candidate. We pointed out that a similar law had been declared unconstitutional in California, but that was to no avail.

 Made with AI

DUE PROCESS Self-Storage Default Notices

(H 5364Aam, S 213A)

Due to some politicking on the House floor, this legislation passed without an amendment that would have restored vital notice requirements for self-storage unit customers who default on payments. The amendments to the existing law in this bill that passed will directly and adversely affect many Rhode Islanders experiencing poverty or homelessness who make use of self-storage units. This legislation will make it easier for the owners of these units to sell the property in them after a renter defaults, with less opportunity for renters to be able to rectify the default in a timely manner.



Good Bills that Died 🗣️

PRIVACY Data Privacy (H 5857, S 824) — DIED IN COMMITTEE

We strongly supported legislation that would provide critical safeguards for the privacy of reproductive and gender-affirming healthcare data. Specifically, this bill's coverage was directed at those entities that are not covered by HIPAA, but provide reproductive and gender-affirming healthcare services, collect data regarding those services, and direct the use of that data — like period-tracking apps or apps that monitor your location at facilities providing these health services. Unfortunately, this legislation died in committee in both the House and the Senate.



GOVERNMENT TRANSPARENCY

Access to Public Records Reform

(H 6273, S 909) — DIED IN COMMITTEE

The ACLU joined with a coalition of open government groups to support legislation to make important and comprehensive changes to the state's open records law. They included limiting the costs that could be charged for releasing records that are in the public interest, providing greater access to police misconduct records, and requiring more transparency by public bodies in explaining their reasons for withholding records. Unfortunately, the legislation died in committee without a vote.

IMMIGRANTS' RIGHTS "364 Day" Bill

(H 5502, S 63) — DIED IN HOUSE

This key criminal justice reform bill sought to change the maximum prison sentence for a misdemeanor offense from one year to 364 days, addressing a conflict between federal immigration law and Rhode Island law under which immigrants lawfully in the country who are convicted of an offense punishable by a sentence of a year or more may be deported. Dropping a misdemeanor's maximum sentence by one day would ensure that these individuals were not subject to harsh immigration penalties for minor offenses. For the fifth straight year, the bill passed the Senate but died in the House due to Attorney General opposition.

RACIAL JUSTICE Comprehensive Community-Police Relationship Act (H 5220, S 307) — DIED IN SENATE

Legislation reinstating the collection and analysis of data relating to police traffic stops and searches, designed to determine if patterns of racial profiling exist, died in the closing hours of the 2025 legislative session after passing the House of Representatives. The data collection law, which had routinely shown significant racial disparities in the stopping and searching of cars by police, expired in 2020 and has not been revived since. Last-minute politicking by the RI Police Chiefs Association killed the bill in the waning hours of the session. The ACLU is staunchly committed to seeing it enacted in 2026.

Prison Gerrymandering — Legislation to permanently ban prison gerrymandering and address the over-representation of Cranston in the General Assembly failed to make it out of committee. (H 5538, S 524)

Homeless Bill of Rights — Important legislation which would strengthen the Homeless Bill of Rights died in committee without a vote. (H 5665)

School Computer Privacy — This important privacy legislation would strictly limit remote access to school-loaned computer microphones and cameras by school officials, but it died in the Senate after passing the House. (H 5176A, S 232)

Juvenile Interrogation — A bill to prohibit police from questioning juveniles suspected of criminal activity without a parent or legal guardian present passed the House but died in the Senate. (H 5298A, S 148)

IN THE COMMUNITY... photos on next page

Our staff, Board members, and volunteers have been a constant presence in the community over the past few months, spreading awareness about our work, Know Your Rights materials, and (of course) our fantastic merch! Recent events we've tabled at, with great success, include the "No Kings" rally, a Trans Health Conference, and PrideFest.

Bad Bills that Died 🍷

JUSTICE REFORM Increasing AG Powers

(H 6164, S 956) — DIED IN COMMITTEE

We strongly opposed legislation that would expand the authority and powers of the Department of Attorney General (AG) to engage in intrusive investigatory practices. Specifically, this legislation would have broadly entitled the AG to conduct civil investigations and bring court action to enjoin any “repeated illegal acts,” allowing the Attorney General to supersede, and potentially interfere with, the current jurisdiction of numerous other executive agencies that enforce statutory and regulatory protections over a wide array of business and governmental conduct. This legislation died in committee. Last year, the bill passed both Houses, but was vetoed by Governor McKee, who relied largely on the arguments made by the ACLU in a veto request to him.

JUSTICE REFORM Crime Bills

We opposed a slew of legislation which would have broadly expanded penalties for certain crimes, including bills making the “false” reporting of police misconduct

a misdemeanor offense; making shoplifting a felony if done together with another person; establishing mandatory minimum sentences for sexual assault; and an AG bill that would have doubled and tripled the prison penalties for a variety of driving offenses (S 814; S 822; H 5924, S 562; H 5638, S 947).

We also successfully opposed legislation that would have criminalized other activities, like bringing any perceived “contraband” into or out of the Training School; engaging in vaguely defined “electronic stalking”; making it a crime for 18-to-21-year olds, who can gamble in casinos, to gamble electronically; and making it a crime to occupy an abandoned dwelling without permission, targeting members of our communities who are without homes (H 5437, S 619; H 5655; H 5643, S 623; 5919, S 817).

We also vigorously opposed a bill that would have moved the independent state crime laboratory into the Department of the Attorney General (H 6229, S 95).

None of these bills were passed this legislative session.

Documenting Domestic Violence “Arguments” — Intrusive legislation that would have required police to complete a domestic violence reporting form any time they responded to a non-chargeable domestic “argument,” and add it to a domestic violence database, died in House Committee. (H 5895, S 525)

Social Media Regulation Act — Legislation that would have required minors to have parental consent to access various social media sites, and that would have imposed unnecessary burdens on all users’ abilities to visit internet spaces and express themselves freely, died in committee. (H 5291, S 929)

50 Feet Electioneering — Legislation to extend the current ban against candidates campaigning within 50 feet of a polling place to apply to city and town halls during the three weeks of early voting died after passing the House. (H 5084, S 569)

“Workplace Psychological Safety Act” — A piece of vague and intrusive legislation that would impose liability on employers or co-workers who, among other actions, “confuse” a person emotionally or don’t treat a fellow employee “respectfully” died in House committee after passing the Senate. (H 5132, S 959)



Heather and Zoe weathering the rainy No Kings rally. Thanks also to volunteers Carl, David, and Jacob.



Kate and Lindsey explaining the ACLU's materials at PrideFest. Thanks also to Carl, Heather, Cheryl, Lanham, Debbie, and Victoria.



Zoe (pictured) and Monica provided information to attendees at the Trans Health Conference.

LAWSUITS PROTECTING CIVIL LIBERTIES

Settlement Reached in Smithfield School District Social Media Censorship Lawsuit

The ACLU of Rhode Island favorably settled a federal lawsuit that challenged, as a violation of the First Amendment, Smithfield School District actions in blocking a local school critic from the official X (formerly Twitter) accounts of the district and the school district superintendent. As a result of the settlement, the school district has agreed to unblock all individuals from the official X accounts and make both accounts public.

The lawsuit was filed in June by ACLU of Rhode Island cooperating attorney David Cass on behalf of Smithfield resident Daniel Mayer. Mayer had regularly viewed and interacted with Superintendent Dawn Bartz's X account page to stay informed about school issues. Last August, his X account was blocked from following and viewing her posts after he advocated for Bartz's resignation. Shortly thereafter, both Bartz and the school district changed their X accounts to require all people to seek approval in order to gain access to them.

These posts are protected

Only approved followers can see @SmithfieldSuper's posts. To request access, click Follow. [Learn more](#)

Under the joint stipulation dismissing the lawsuit, the school district agreed:

- To unblock all previously banned accounts;
- That no users will be blocked from the accounts on the basis of their First Amendment-protected viewpoints; and
- That advance approval will no longer be required for the public to access the accounts.

ACLU and RWU Law School Clinic Sue Again Over ACI's Failure to Accommodate Incarcerated Native Americans' Religious Freedom

The ACLU of RI and the RWU Law Prisoners' Rights Clinic have filed a federal lawsuit on behalf of three Native American prisoners at the Adult Correctional Institutions (ACI) who claim that prison officials have failed to reasonably accommodate their religious practices. The lawsuit was filed just weeks after the settlement of a separate lawsuit by the ACLU and the Clinic on behalf of another incarcerated Native American who had been denied access to a religious headband.

This latest lawsuit, filed by Jared Goldstein, Director of the Prisoners' Rights Clinic, and ACLU of RI cooperating attorney Lynette Labinger, argues that the state Department of Corrections (RIDOC) has refused to accommodate an array of religious practices that Native Americans are routinely allowed to practice in federal and state prisons across the country. They include the right to hold communal prayer services and other religious ceremonies, to have access to a Native American elder to provide religious guidance, and the ability to obtain religious items that express their religious traditions, including medicine bags and dream catchers.

All three of the plaintiffs — Tyler Smith, Kyle Moreino, and Joseph Shepard — are of Native American ancestry and adherents to Native American religious traditions. The lawsuit documents their numerous unsuccessful efforts to get RIDOC to accommodate their religious beliefs.

The suit was brought under the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act, a federal law that bars states from imposing any substantial burden on a prisoner's exercise of religion unless it furthers a compelling interest and is the least restrictive means available. The suit seeks a court order requiring RIDOC to accommodate the prisoners' religious beliefs that have been denied them as laid out in the complaint.



Example of a religious headband that a Native American man incarcerated at the ACI now has access to after a victory in a separate, but very similar, ACLU of RI religious freedom lawsuit

ACLU Sues Brown University Police for Keeping Arrest Records Secret

The ACLU of RI is contesting the Brown University Police Department's position that it is not subject to the state's Access to Public Records Act (APRA) and can keep its arrest reports secret from the public. ACLU of RI cooperating attorney Fausto Anguilla filed suit in R.I. Superior Court against Brown University's Department of Public Safety (BDPS) on behalf of two journalists after BDPS refused to provide them reports of arrests made by its officers.

In 2022, Noble Brigham, who was then a *Brown Daily Herald* reporter, was investigating the story of a man who had been charged multiple times by BDPS with trespassing and breaking and entering on the Brown campus. Brigham submitted an APRA request for the arrest reports, but ultimately the agency asserted that APRA didn't apply because Brown is a private university and BDPS was not subject to that law.

In 2023, *Motif Magazine* reporter Michael Bilow was reporting on 41 Brown University students who were arrested by BDPS officers for trespassing after protesting university investment practices and refusing to leave a university building after hours. When Bilow filed an APRA request for the arrest reports, BDPS ignored the request, as it had initially done with Brigham. Both Bilow and Brigham independently filed complaints with the Attorney General, who has the authority to investigate APRA violations. It was not until January of this year that that office issued an opinion on the complaints and took BDPS's side that it was not subject to APRA.

Noting that APRA explicitly applies to private agencies that are "acting on behalf of and/or in place of any public agency," the ACLU lawsuit claims that BDPS clearly meets that definition. The suit notes that "BDPS police officers are sworn law enforcement officers and are explicitly vested with the same powers and authority that are vested in a state or municipal police officer"; they are appointed by the state police superintendent; they are explicitly designated by state law as "peace officers" with the power to arrest people; and, in Brown's own words on its website, they "have police jurisdiction on campus and upon the streets and highways adjacent to the campus."



The lawsuit seeks a declaratory judgment determining that BDPS is a public body within the meaning of APRA and therefore must comply with APRA requests for arrest records and other publicly available law enforcement documents.

LEGAL BRIEFS

ACLU Brief in Support of Regulation Protecting Transgender Students from Discrimination Is Rejected by Judge

The ACLU of RI, joined by two parents with children in public schools in the state, filed a "friend of the court" brief in R.I. Superior Court in support of a R.I. Department of Education (RIDE) regulation that protects transgender and gender nonconforming students from discrimination in school. The brief was filed in response to a lawsuit filed earlier this year which alleges that a state law barring "sex discrimination" in schools does not apply to protect LGBTQ+ students, and that RIDE therefore had no authority to adopt the regulation. The ACLU brief argued that neither claim had merit, but Judge Joseph McBurney, supporting a motion by the plaintiff, refused to accept the brief, calling it unnecessary. The ACLU will continue to track the case and be prepared to file a brief in any appeal.

ACLU Supports AIDS Healthcare Foundation Class-Action Suit

ACLU of RI is providing legal assistance in a class-action suit brought by the AIDS Healthcare Foundation, challenging certain prescription drug pricing practices of pharmacy benefit managers as an antitrust violation. Those practices, which monopolistically inflate HIV drug prices, impose a significant financial burden on patients in being able to access the appropriate health care they need. While antitrust cases are not something the ACLU of RI would normally get involved in, this class-action suit could have a major impact on a vulnerable population's access to necessary health care.



RECENT ACLU OF RI ADVOCACY

PAWTUCKET After a Pawtucket police officer shot resident Sebastian Yidana who was waving a toy gun, news reports indicated that, despite the officer being equipped with a body worn camera, there was no video footage of the shooting. In addition, the officer never submitted a written report documenting the shooting, in violation of departmental policy and common sense. In response, the ACLU has sent a letter to Attorney General Peter Neronha urging him to investigate the failures of the department to ensure that body worn cameras and “use of force” protocols were properly followed. The ACLU has also written city officials, demanding an explanation for the missing video footage. The ACLU plans to follow up on these matters until satisfactory answers are provided.

STATEWIDE After the DMV had a technical error that caused July vehicle registration renewal reminders to motorists to be delayed, the agency agreed to extend the registrations through August. In response, the ACLU called on the DMV to contact all police departments in the state to make sure they were aware of the extension and would not begin stopping and ticketing motorists for having “expired” registrations when August rolled around. The DMV responded with confirmation that police officials have been apprised of the situation.

PROVIDENCE The ACLU called out Providence police when they began issuing \$500 noise violation citations to striking workers protesting outside Butler Hospital. The problem was that Providence’s noise ordinance set a fine of \$200. Shortly thereafter, Providence City Council President Rachel Miller proposed an ordinance that would exempt “conduct stemming directly from known, organized, or impromptu acts of striking workers” from the City’s current noise ordinance. After the ACLU pointed out that a special exemption like this would be unconstitutional, no action was taken on the ordinance.

DEVELOPMENT CORNER

Our offices are located near a courthouse that serves a lot of Rhode Islanders, and every day I see people coming and going from their appointments. These are families who are adopting, people who need assistance to navigate the system, and people seeking support as they challenge unsafe people and places. Courthouses are a space that serves so many important functions in our society, yet more and more, we are hearing stories about people being targeted by ICE as they leave the courthouse. People with no criminal records. People seeking safety and assistance. Neighbors who contribute to the fabric of our community. And when these acts happen in public institutions — spaces meant to serve everyone — it undermines the rule of law, due process, and basic human dignity.

Each day, I am inundated with the reality of the work we do and the tensions generated by the current administration. At the ACLU of Rhode Island, we stand unwavering in our commitment to protecting the rights and freedoms of all people, especially when those rights are under attack. We believe that no one should fear persecution for participating in civic life because justice cannot flourish where fear thrives. Our mission is grounded in the belief that dignity, fairness, and freedom are not privileges, but fundamental rights.

I like to believe that Rhode Island still stands on hope. We see that hope in action with the work of our coalition partner AMOR in organizing everyday Rhode Islanders show up at the courthouse — not to attend a hearing, but to protect their neighbors and not let governmental intimidation go unchallenged. This kind of grassroots vigilance reminds us: when systems fail, people rise.



As documented in this newsletter, we carry that spirit into all aspects of our work — whether through legislative advocacy at the State House, litigation in the courts, or public education in the community — all aimed at making Rhode Island a safer, fairer, and more just place for everyone. And we hope you’ll carry that spirit with us throughout our events this fall, rounding off at our Annual Meeting on November 6th, when we will gather to reflect, to act, and to celebrate the collective power of community.

– Monica Smith, Development Coordinator

Photo by Maddie Van

EVENTS: RECAPS & UPCOMING



RECAPS:

Postcards to Legislators in South County *left*

In May, we held a second postcard writing workshop in South Kingstown, adding to the hundreds of postcards sent by members to legislators about key bills during the session.

U.S. Supreme Court Wrap-Up *not pictured*

With the help of five guest attorneys, we explained the key decisions from the 2025 SCOTUS docket, and what they mean for civil liberties. Watch it on our YouTube channel, at youtube.com/RhodeIslandACLU.

Legislative Session Wrap-Up *below*

We recapped the 2025 RI legislative session in Cranston in mid-July, discussing how major bills passed and died, and where they left civil liberties in Rhode Island. *Special thanks to Trader Joe's in Providence for their donation!*



L-R: Jan Luby, Joanne Lurgio, Mike Laureanno, Mary Ann Rossini, Mark Cutler

Special thanks to Jan Luby, a long-time member and supporter, for hosting An Evening of Rhode Island Songwriters, a benefit concert for the ACLU Foundation of RI! Jan brought together four other wonderful local musicians who performed at the Blackstone River Theatre in Cumberland.



L-R: ACLU of RI Exec. Director Steven Brown, Rep. Jennifer Stewart, ACLU Policy Associate Madalyn McGunagle, Rep. Cherie Cruz, and Board Vice-Chair Christine Lopes Metcalfe

SATURDAY, AUGUST 23: Back to School Event

We'll be tabling at multiple Back to School RI locations, where families can collect supplies and "know your rights" information for their kids before the school year begins. More information at btsri.org.

SUNDAY, AUGUST 24: Rhode Island Folk Festival

Held at Crescent Park in East Providence. Find our table and say hello!

OCTOBER 5-11: Banned Books Week *DATE TO BE ANNOUNCED*

We're planning our annual banned books event where we bring together authors to read from banned books and discuss censorship in Rhode Island and beyond. We'll be sending out more information soon!

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 6: ACLU of RI Annual Meeting

The Guild in Pawtucket (461 Main St, Pawtucket)

More information to follow via invitation and at riaclu.org/annualMeeting.

We invite you to join us for our 2025 Annual Meeting, where we'll debrief on the extremely busy year that happened, and look to the year ahead — and there's no doubt there's a lot of work to be done. Keep an eye out for an official invitation in your mailbox and your email inbox.

If you or your business are interested in sponsoring this year's event, it's a great way to highlight your support for civil liberties and be featured in our program. Sponsors receive complimentary tickets. Reach out to Monica at msmith@riaclu.org to learn more.

Save the date!



ACLU FOUNDATION of RHODE ISLAND
128 Dorrance Street, Suite 400
Providence, RI 02903

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The legislative session is over, summer is here, but protecting civil liberties is a year-round job. Your donation will keep us active in the courts and hosting educational events throughout the state, no matter the time of year.

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

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Trump Administration.