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ACLU OF RI POSITION: SUPPORT

TESTIMONY ON 23-S 401, RELATING TO STATE AFFAIRS AND GOVERNMENT -- COMMISSION ON STANDARDS AND TRAINING February 28, 2023

The ACLU of Rhode Island supports this bill, which would require training of police officers in responding to individuals with cognitive and communication-related disabilities.

Sadly, the nation has witnessed numerous tragedies occur across the country in recent years when a member of law enforcement encounters an individual with a cognitive and/or communication-related disability and, misconstruing the person's demeanor, inappropriately and harmfully reacts.

This bill will help make these encounters safer for, and more respectful of, all those involved. For a number of years, state law has required mandatory training standards for police to deal with victims, witnesses and suspects with mental health or substance abuse disorders. R.I.G.L. § 42-28.2-8.3. This legislation would fill a gap in that law.

Whether the individual with such a disability is a victim/complainant, a witness, or a suspect, they deserve to have their unique struggles and needs better understood and respected by members of law enforcement during these encounters. Similarly, unless members of law enforcement receive the proper training to better understand how to encounter those with developmental disabilities, the individual's safety, as well as the safety of the officers and any bystanders, is likely to be at risk.

This legislation would thus increase the safety of citizens and law enforcement alike, while still respecting the civil rights entitled to those with a cognitive or communication-related disability. Teaching members of law enforcement increased empathy for these individuals is a win-win for all involved.

Thank you for your time and attention to our views.