



Public Testimony
Senate Judiciary Committee
Senate Bill 405
June 6, 2017

Submitted by The Rhode Island Interfaith Coalition to Reduce Poverty

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Good evening. My name is Rabbi Jeffrey Goldwasser. I am the rabbi serving Temple Sinai in Cranston and a steering committee member of the Rhode Island Interfaith Coalition to Reduce Poverty. I am testifying today to express my support for Senate Bill 405, “The Protect Rhode Island Families Act,” a bill that would keep firearms out of the hands of perpetrators of domestic violence.

I want to ask you to imagine what it felt like for me a few years ago when I was counseling a woman in the congregation I served who was the victim of domestic violence. I could plainly see the bruises on her arms, neck and face that her partner had inflicted upon her. I told her that she always had options to stop the abuse. She could report the abuse to authorities. She could come up with an escape plan. She could let trusted friends and family members know about the abuse and set up a signal for them to come to her aid when she needed it.

Imagine how I might have felt when she said to me, “Rabbi, you don’t understand. He has a gun.”

I am not in a profession of judging or blaming people in a dispute. My job, as a clergy member, is to help people move beyond their anger, fear and resentments – when that is possible – and to help bring about forgiveness, acceptance, and rebuilding broken relationships and broken families. My experience, however, is that when people in a broken relationship fear for their very lives because of a gun, that healing becomes impossible.

Some people will tell you that the use of a firearm in a domestic violence situation is rare and that there is no point in compromising people’s rights with legislation like the bill that is before you. I am here to tell you today that it does not matter if the gun is never fired. It does not even matter if the gun is safely stored and locked in a closet. The mere presence of that gun in the relationship will

terrify and isolate the victim. It will prevent open and honest dialogue. It will hold the victim hostage. It will make my job impossible.

Domestic violence knows no boundaries of race, socioeconomic status, or culture. It is present all around us. The bill before you is not about competing ideologies or about Second Amendment rights. It is about putting a stop to domestic situations that destroy the lives of adults and children. It is about the pervasive threat of domestic violence that tears at the very fabric of our communities and society. It is about allowing repair and healing where there now is fear, brokenness and destruction.

Judaism has very specific teachings about preventing violence. The book of Leviticus teaches, “Do not stand idly by the blood of your neighbor” (Leviticus 19:16). The commandment is viewed in Jewish tradition as a prohibition against doing nothing while others are dying and while we have the power to save them. Rashi, the great medieval commentator of the Hebrew Bible gives the specific example that we must act to prevent a person who is in imminent danger of being attacked by a criminal.

We do have such a situation today. There are people who are being attacked by criminals with guns and it is within our power to stop them. You can do something about it by passing Senate Bill 405. This is the legislation we need to take firearms away from people convicted of domestic violence and those who have been identified by the courts as posing a threat of domestic violence.

The congregation I serve in Cranston is almost unanimously in support of this legislation. When I spoke about this bill at services last Friday night, I was overwhelmed by people who told me that they favored it and would call their lawmakers about it. Jewish tradition teaches us not to stand idly by the blood of our neighbor. Together, we can choose action over idleness.

I would like to thank the members of the committee for your public service and for your consideration of this important question.