



RHODE ISLAND KIDS COUNT

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**Testimony Re: House Bill 5489 Regarding Protective Orders for All
Children Who Witness Domestic Violence
House Judiciary Committee
March 5, 2019
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Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today. Rhode Island KIDS COUNT would like to voice its support for House Bill 5489. This bill would allow plaintiffs seeking a domestic abuse protective order in family court to include any of their minor children who are not related to the defendant by blood or marriage within the same complaint and restraining order, rather than seeking a protective order in district or superior court of children not biologically-related or marriage-related to the defendant. For example, children from a previous relationship or foster children who are not blood-related to the abusive party, would now be protected.

Each year, an estimated 10 million U.S. children are exposed to domestic violence. Children can experience domestic violence in a variety of ways. They may witness it directly by hearing or seeing violence incidents, have their lives disrupted by moving or being separated from a parent, and/or may be used by the abusive parent to gain control over the victim.

Exposure to domestic violence is distressing to children and can lead to mental health problems, including posttraumatic stress, depression, and anxiety, in childhood and later in life. Children who witness domestic violence are more likely to be victims of child abuse, experience physical, emotional, health, and learning challenges throughout their childhood and adulthood. They are more likely to have concentration and memory problems, and to have difficulty with school performance than children who have not witnessed domestic violence.

In Rhode Island in 2015, the most recent year in which arrest data is available, there were 5,553 domestic violence incidents that resulted in arrests, up 5% from 5,265 incidents in 2014. Children were reported present in 28% (1,549) of incidents in 2015.

During 2017, the network provided services to 8,758 individuals, including 604 children (up from 8,710 and 447, respectively, in 2016). In 2017, 261 children and 278 adults spent a total of 26,758 nights in domestic violence shelters. During 2017, 117 children and 111 adults lived in domestic violence

transitional housing (longer-term private apartments for victims of domestic violence) for a total of 21,688 nights.

Incidents of domestic violence are historically under-reported. Nationally, it is estimated that 41% of family violence incidents are not reported to police. Rhode Island data suggest similar under-reporting of the number of domestic violence incidents witnessed by children because not all incidents are reported to police and children may be unwilling to admit that they witnessed the incident.

Ensuring the safety and protection of all children, whether biologically related or not, who are exposed to domestic violence is a critical safety concern. It is important we consider the safety and well-being of any child who is exposed to domestic violence and as a result we urge passage of House Bill 5489.

Thank you for the leadership that the General Assembly has shown to ensure protections for all children witnessing domestic violence.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

