



May 17, 2021

RE: 21-S 671, Relating to Public Records

Dear Chair Coyne and Members of the Senate Judiciary Committee:

We are writing on behalf of the Rhode Island Press Association and the New England First Amendment Coalition.¹ Our organizations include members of the press in Rhode Island and throughout the region.

We write to oppose Senate Bill 671 (heard by your committee last week) which would make secret police officer city and town residency information. At a time when citizens throughout the state — and country — are demanding more transparency and accountability within police departments, this legislation will needlessly keep citizens uninformed about the officers patrolling their streets.

While we respect the need to maintain the safety of law enforcement officers, the Access to Public Records Act already exempts the street addresses of these officers and sufficiently protects their privacy. Senate Bill 671 will set a troubling precedent that may be applied to other public employees with even less expectation of privacy. The bill will also impede the ability of newsrooms to adequately report on community policing trends and best practices.

APRA Already Protects Police Officer Privacy | The Access to Public Records Act currently limits the disclosure of public employee personnel information. The street addresses of police officers are exempt from the statute. Allowing only the city or town of residence to be disclosed — as has been the case for many years — does not pose a significant risk to law enforcement officers.

Senate Bill 671 Would Make Troubling Precedent | Senate Bill 671 not only needlessly erodes the public's right to know about government, but it creates a slippery slope that will lead to more secrecy. The misguided rationale for limiting access to the cities and towns of police officers could ultimately result in similar APRA exemptions for other public employees — even those with less privacy expectations and safety concerns.

Police Transparency and Accountability Will Suffer | With law enforcement practices receiving renewed scrutiny throughout the country, information about where officers live can lead to a better understanding of community policing. Do officers engage in more or less misconduct, for example, when working in a community they also call home? Questions such as this one will not be answered given the secrecy proposed by Senate Bill 671.

Police officers are the frontline protectors of our communities. Given the valuable role of police departments — and the tremendous power they wield — their policies and practices are of great public interest. Citizens and the press need the ability to oversee and understand how these departments work. It's a matter of accountability. Senate Bill 671 needlessly undercuts that transparency and makes the already daunting task of overseeing police departments even more difficult.

On behalf of our organizations, please reject S-671. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

James Bessette
Rhode Island Press Association
President

Justin Silverman
New England First Amendment Coalition
Executive Director

¹ The Rhode Island Press Association is a nonprofit organization that advocates for local print journalism and open government. Its membership includes several Rhode Island-based print publications. Learn more about RIPA at ripressassociation.org. The New England First Amendment Coalition is the region's leading advocate for First Amendment freedoms and the public's right to know about its government. Learn more about NEFAC at nefac.org.