

COMMENTARY

The Providence Journal

PUBLISHERS OF
The Providence Journal since 1829
The Providence Sunday Journal since 1885
The Evening Bulletin from 1863-1995

The Providence Journal, the oldest continuously published daily newspaper in the United States, is the winner of four Pulitzer Prizes.
DISTINGUISHED NEWSPAPER
New England Newspaper & Press Association

Domestic violence survivors need action now to stop abusive litigation

Your Turn
Lucy Rios
Guest columnist

Nearly 1 in 3 Rhode Islanders report having experienced domestic violence by an intimate partner at some point in their lives. As the leader of the Rhode Island Coalition Against Domestic Violence, I am committed to supporting survivors. I urge our elected officials and State House leadership to swiftly pass a bill called Rhode Island’s Abusive Litigation Act (S604 by Sen. Dawn Euer, and H5883 by Rep. Katherine Kazarian) that would protect survivors seeking relief from post-separation abuse perpetrated through the justice system.

Survivors in Rhode Island are voicing that they face a second form of abuse after they get free from an abusive relationship: abusive litigation. Abusive litigation is when a party who has been abusive in the relationship uses the courts by filing multiple baseless legal claims to maintain contact, retaliate, coerce, intimidate, control and harm a victim mentally, emotionally, and financially.

The abuser is wielding their power all over again; only this time, they are doing so by proxy of the court system, forcing the victim back in the presence of the abuser with meritless claims meant to punish, and even destroy, the survivor.

Last weekend, we were informed that former attorney, domestic violence survivor and abusive litigation victim Catherine Youssef Kassenoff took her own life after being diagnosed with a terminal health issue, and receiving news that she would not be allowed any contact with her daughters by the court.

She shared this in her final message, “I hope in death I will accomplish what I could not in life. I hope our legislators, judges, media and others will take notice of the price I am paying today ... I hope the public will stand up and say ‘no more.’ Your children deserve better. So did mine.”

The RICADV task force of survivors SOAR (Sisters Overcoming Abusive Relationships) is actively supporting this bill, and many have shown up at the State House to urge passage. They shared similar stories to that of Catherine, who lost everything to this devastating form of abuse. Sadly, some SOAR members could not provide public testimony in fear it could further be used against them in ongoing cases. One survivor told us of the cycle of abuse, “Everything revolved around going to court. I would get the summons to go to court and ruminate for a week until the date. Then three weeks later it would happen again.”

Another survivor shared the economic impacts of abusive litigation, “It has been financially devastating having to spend thousands of dollars on court and attorney fees. I filed for bankruptcy in 2017 and I lost my house during another filing process.”

The passage of the bill would give power to the courts to prevent this form of abuse and is modeled on a similar law passed in 2020 in Washington. Similar legislation was just passed into law in Vermont and a comparable bill is currently pending in Massachusetts.

Rhode Island must also act now to protect survivors. One SOAR member shared her testimony with legislators this session:

“I’m asking you to help me and other victims get our lives back and be able to move on after an abusive relationship has ended. We hope you will help us pass this important legislation so we can move to protect and support survivors of domestic violence in Rhode Island.”

I stand with survivors in our state, and I hope you will too. Let’s protect survivors from living their lives in fear and continued abuse. We must act now and help survivors live free from the harms of abusive litigation.

Lucy Rios is the executive director of the Rhode Island Coalition Against Domestic Violence.

Survivors in Rhode Island are voicing that they face a second form of abuse after they get free from an abusive relationship: abusive litigation.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Restore voting rights to fire district residents

Residents in the Bonnet Shores Fire District, who have been denied their legal right to vote in fire district elections for decades, may be denied their constitutional right to vote again if the General Assembly fails to approve two new bills now in committees.

Despite a successful lawsuit against the fire district last year in Superior Court, and despite a legal settlement document between the plaintiffs and the district that followed, the effort to create a new fire district charter is stuck in both the House and Senate Judiciary Committees just two weeks before the Assembly goes into recess.

The two bills would allow the General Assembly to correct an egregious error in the district’s original 1932 charter which stipulates that only those who own \$400 of property are qualified to vote in district elections. That means that some 4,000 non-residents at the private Bonnet Shores Beach Club each have a full vote. But people who actually reside in Bonnet, whose names are not on the deed to their home, are denied the right to vote. In fact, non-resident voters at the Beach Club actually outnumber real residents here by two to one.

Which has given them unlimited political control over our community.

This should have been a clear legislative decision to right the wrongs of the past, but unfortunately Fire District Chair Carol O’Donnell, a longtime Beach Club member, is fighting against the proposed new legislation.

It is a sad state of affairs when our elected representatives pretend to support an issue as significant and far reaching as voting rights in order to appease a private club whose members have no right to vote here.

Let’s hope that the powers that be at the State

Join the conversation

We want to hear from you. Your Turn commentaries should be no more than 600 words, including a short bio of the writer. Letters to the editor should be no more than 250 words; we prefer 150 or fewer.

For both: Include your full name, full address and phone number. Write the text in the body of an email, or copy it in; don’t attach a file of any kind. Then send them to letters@providencejournal.com, our address for both letters and longer pieces.

House see the light and move these two bills before recess.

Paula Childs, Narragansett

Freezing COLA violated the Constitution

In 1976 I left the position of director, Consumer Protection, Department of Attorney General, and was elected to the Rhode Island Senate with an annual salary of \$300. I retired in 1987 with a pension of \$6,000, later increased to \$12,000, then rolled back to \$6,000.

I sued the state in Federal Court. The suit was joined by the Rhode Island Association of Former Legislators, and became a class action. The court declared, through a ruling in a similar case in Pennsylvania, that the state violated the “taking” section of the Constitution of the United States, which states clearly that you cannot take something from someone without replacing it with something of equal value.

I contend, the State of Rhode Island violated the Constitution when it froze my COLA.

John Gilgun, Pawtucket

The writer was a Rhode Island state senator representing Central Falls from 1977 to 1987.



Members of the Pawtuxet Rangers march in the Gaspee Days Parade in Warwick in 2021.

BOB BREIDENBACH/THE PROVIDENCE JOURNAL, FILE

Parade delivers another lesson on colonizing

Your Turn
Lance Eaton
Guest columnist

Mark Twain’s quote “History doesn’t repeat itself but it often rhymes” can be seen alive and well on Narragansett Parkway in Warwick this week. On June 10, Pawtuxet Village holds its annual Gaspee Days Parade to celebrate British colonists torching a British ship because a British customs officer was overly aggressive in claiming illicit property.

In the following years, those colonists, too, would aggressively claim property that wasn’t theirs in one of history’s greatest land grabs, the American Revolution. After all, what else would you call it when tenants claim they own the land they had been renting? And, of course, that ignores that much of the lands were acquired through the theft or murder of Indigenous peoples. In the following century, the descendants of those torch-wielding colonists in their quest for more “freedom” would strip lands and rights from the Narragansetts, the very people for whom the parkway is named.

Beyond the evident connection of an annual celebration of one’s freedom that proves integral to the oppression of others, there is one other fascinating element that connects Twain’s observation to the Gaspee Days Parade.

Chairs have gradually appeared along the parkway’s sidewalks. First a few, and by the middle of this week, nearly a hundred (mostly plastic) chairs sat unoccupied. Many chairs were tied or chained down as if they were going to up and run away, while others were wrapped in caution tape — like lingering evidence in a

crime scene. In other spots, rope or caution tape was just looped around trees and posts, closing off a section. It’s quite the sight to see all the empty chairs at night. It’s as if spirits are attending some spectral parade to which we aren’t privy.

So what’s happening here? Well, the local residents are claiming property that is not theirs (i.e., the green patch of sidewalks both in front of their house and other spots are public property) so they can enjoy front-row seats to the parade and doing so in a way to preclude people whom they think do not belong there. These others who don’t live there, at best, deserve the back-row seats.

It’s strange to think, but those chairs represent an assertion of power — the right to claim space that doesn’t belong to you. After all, what would happen if someone came along and occupied those abandoned chairs, destroyed them, or replaced them with their own chairs? It’s hard not to imagine that the next course of action would entail confrontation, some pseudo-legal claim of property (though abandoned on public property), or force (individually or through enlisting the police).

Ultimately, these folks’ rationalization of their right to claim public property would boil down to a mixture of “because it’s there” and “because I can.”

To watch this scene play out year after year, one cannot help but think that even in rituals such as parades, our legacy of colonialism and right by assertion or force looms large in our psyche. As a microcosm of the American legacy, it raises lots of questions about when some people’s freedom comes at the cost or threat to other people’s freedom.

Lance Eaton is an educator and writer in Cranston.