



Testimony in support of
S.764/H.1209 An Act relative to sexual violence on higher education campuses
Submitted to the Joint Committee on Higher Education
By Susan Loffredo, LWVMA Higher Education Specialist
April 25, 2019

Sexual assault, dating violence, and stalking are significant problems on higher education campuses throughout Massachusetts and across the country. The Association of American Universities conducted a climate survey in 2015 which revealed that 23% of female respondents experienced non-consensual sexual contact by physical force or incapacitation. The vast majority of these incidents were unreported.

This under-reporting stems from the fact that victims of sexual violence often feel shame about what happened and fear being exposed to retribution. Students are often unaware of supports and resources available to them, and may not understand the ramifications of confiding in a staff member who is mandated to report the incident to authorities regardless of the wishes of the student. Losing control over this process adds to the significant trauma experienced by the victim.

There is a lack of transparency about the incidence of sexual violence because colleges are not required to include these incidents in their crime reporting. As a result, prospective students cannot judge whether they would feel safe on a given campus, and colleges cannot easily be held accountable for ensuring the safety of all of their students.

The League of Women Voters of Massachusetts strongly believes that victims of sexual violence must be supported, not blamed. Many in our country continue to accept the outdated notions that “boys will be boys” and that women should be responsible for behaving in a way that does not invite unwanted attention. No one, regardless of what they are wearing or how much they have been drinking, deserves to be sexually assaulted, especially not on the campuses of our institutions of higher education. To have less than the best policies, procedures, support, and training in place is to shortchange our students. Depriving women on campus of full protection from sexual violence deprives them of equality of opportunity for education.

One of the League of Women Voters’ core beliefs is that government has the “responsibility to provide equality of opportunity for education, employment, and housing for all persons in the United States regardless of their race, color, gender, religion, national origin, age, sexual orientation, or disability.” Passage of this bill would lead to effective and appropriate support for victims, transparency and accountability from colleges and universities, and trauma response and bystander training to equip students and staff with the tools to prevent sexual violence and respond in the most helpful way possible.

For these reasons, the League of Women Votes of Massachusetts, representing 47 local Leagues from Cape Cod to the Berkshires, supports this bill. We ask that you favorably report this bill out of committee and thank you for your consideration.