

March 18, 2026

OPPOSE: H7559 and H7560 Reducing Protections in the Rental Registry and Lead Hazard Mitigation Statutes

Dear Chair and Members of the House Judiciary Committee,

The Center for Justice is writing to OPPOSE H7559 and H7560. Each of these bills erodes the very effective protections of the critically important Statewide Mandatory Rental Registry, a bulwark against lead poisoning of children.

Each of these bills, if passed, would limit the effectiveness of the state's lead poisoning protections including the Rental Registry which has proven to be the first demonstrably effective tool to compel large-scale compliance with the state's lead poisoning prevention laws.

H7599 would limit the applicability of the registry to only owners of pre-1978 dwelling units and limit the information that is made publicly available on the Registry. By reducing the transparency and scope of the Registry these changes would again deny tenants a simple, single, publicly vetted source to learn whether their home is required to be lead safe, whether it is, in fact, lead safe, and how to contact their landlord or property manager to raise health and safety concerns.

The legislation proposes to remove two crucial tenant protections that were included in the Registry when it was enacted to improve the health and safety of Rhode Island renters: that contact information for the landlord be publicly available through the registry and that a landlord may not begin an eviction for non-payment against a tenant if the landlord has not complied with the registration requirements, including complying with state lead laws.

The requirement for landlords to register their contact information with the Department of Health protects the public interest by providing transparency

for tenants who often do not know whom to contact when the apartments they live in require substantial repairs to comply with state property maintenance codes. While it may seem odd, and it may sound unlikely that a tenant would not know who their landlord is, we can attest as attorneys for many economically distressed tenants in Rhode Island, that it is often the case that our clients have no idea whom to contact for repairs, as some of the properties they live in are neglected for years—even decades—by a succession of absentee landlords. The Rental Registry addressed this issue by providing a single, easily accessible, and up-to-date source of information.

Because of the vital role the Registry plays in providing transparent, up-to-date information, it should not be rolled back to apply only to owners of pre-1978 dwellings. The registry is about more than lead compliance; it also focuses on public safety and overall property conditions. Many pre-1978 dwellings are in good shape and lead-safe, while many post-1978 dwellings are unhealthy and dangerous due to neglect. It makes little sense to base a Rental Registry, which is intended to serve all renters and aid in the rehabilitation of distressed properties, on a distinction between pre- and post-1978 dwelling units that is relevant only to one portion of the Registry's requirements.

Though they are only a subset of the business owners regulated by the Registry, the requirements for owners of pre-1978 dwelling units are vitally important to improving public health in Rhode Island. The Registry has proven to be the most effective tool we have seen to mobilize mass compliance with the state's lead laws. Rhode Island's children are at risk of being poisoned by the homes they live in, suffering lifelong complications from circumstances they could not control. No child should be put in that position, and the only way to avoid it is to make every home in Rhode Island lead-safe or lead-free.

For over 20 years, the majority of property owners subject to the state's two most important lead laws have delayed compliance. Some were exempt until the owner-occupied exemption was repealed in 2024. With the creation of the Registry, landlords are finally coming into compliance at an encouraging rate. Based on our experience representing low-income tenants in evictions this upsurge in compliance is directly attributable to the Registry law's prohibition on landlords filing evictions for non-payment of rent while they are not in compliance with registration requirements.

In short, the Registry is effective. The General Assembly should remain committed to this successful enforcement mechanism for the state's lead

poisoning prevention laws and should not halt progress now. We owe it to our children to not retreat from an effective tool to ensure that their homes are safe and healthy. In our law practice, we investigate landlords' compliance with these laws in our clients' situations. Since the implementation of the Registry, we have observed that many more landlords are meeting the registration requirements. We view this as an encouraging sign of progress.

H7560 would remove the ability of municipal code enforcement to conduct primary enforcement activity for violations of the Lead Hazard Mitigation Act (R.I.G.L. 42-128.1). This would be extremely harmful to the effectiveness of the state's effort to prevent lead poisoning in children because the Department of Health only gets involved in cases where a child has been found to be poisoned whereas municipal code enforcement agencies, as a routine matter, determine whether properties being inspected have obtained a certificate of compliance. The Department of Health intervention is in the aftermath of harm. The provisions of the Lead Hazard Mitigation Act, including the important enforcement sections, focus on prevention and provide accountability for compliance with the law before a child has been poisoned thus protecting all future families and children who may live in that dwelling.

It is crucial to acknowledge that healthy families benefit everyone in the state. Parents of healthy kids are more productive at work and are better able to pay the rent and spend in the economy. Healthy children grow into more prosperous adults. Rather than reverse our commitment to a better future to provide short-term relief during the transition to full compliance with these decades-old health and safety requirements, we should hold fast to our principles and our commitment to the future by leaving this tremendously effective piece of legislation intact.

Thank you for your consideration. We hope that the committee will not vote to advance these two bills which reduce lead protections for Rhode Islanders. Future voters of a healthier, more prosperous Rhode Island will thank you for it.

Respectfully submitted, Jennifer Wood