



State of Rhode Island COMMISSION FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

180 Westminster Street, Providence, RI 02903 – Tel. 401-222-2661

TESTIMONY

BILL NO.: 2026 H 8274
AN ACT RELATING TO PROPERTY -- RHODE ISLAND FAIR
HOUSING PRACTICES ACT

PRIMARY SPONSORS: Representative Ajello

COMMITTEE: House Judiciary

DATE: Mar. 18, 2026

The Rhode Island Commission for Human Rights (“Commission”) **supports this bill and requested that it be introduced.**

The Commission is the state’s primary anti-discrimination law enforcement agency charged with investigating allegations of discrimination in employment, housing, public accommodations, credit and delivery of services. Among the allegations investigated by the Commission are those of race, ancestral origin, age, gender identity, sex and disability discrimination. The Commission is the agency responsible for investigating and enforcing the state Fair Housing Practices Act (“FHPA”) and, in conjunction with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, the federal Fair Housing Act (“FHA”).

This bill makes necessary amendments to the FHPA to address inconsistencies in the law since it was last amended and to ensure it conforms to the federal FHA. It does not give the Commission any new authority or enforcement powers, but rather it is designed to clarify provisions in the FHPA to ensure predictable, consistent enforcement. The bill does the following:

1. Adds “housing status” into the “unlawful practices” section to make it clear that the Commission has jurisdiction over these charges and to clarify what the Commission believes the General Assembly intended when it added housing status as a protected category previously. “Housing status”—whether a person is housed or unhoused—was added to the FHPA definitions section as a protected category,ⁱ but housing status was not added to the section prohibiting discrimination.ⁱⁱ Some attorneys had challenged Commission jurisdiction over housing status charges because of that unintentional omission.

This provision does not prohibit an owner from inquiring about a prospective tenant’s past addresses or prevent an owner from running a background check on a prospective tenant. Rather, it prohibits an owner from deciding whether to rent to a person because the person was previously unhoused.

2. Removes an unconstitutional provision in the FHPA.ⁱⁱⁱ The Commission was previously sued over a section of the Fair Employment Practices Act that barred complainants and respondents from discussing their cases publicly with the Plaintiffs claiming that it violated their free speech rights.^{iv} The FHPA has the same unconstitutional language that was removed from the FEPA.

3. Amends the provision prohibiting discriminatory advertising to include discriminatory statements. Currently, state law prohibits discriminatory advertisements, but not discriminatory statements, meaning that a housing provider could make a discriminatory statement to a person's face, so long as it is not written and distributed.^v While the federal FHA does prohibit discriminatory statements,^{vi} this gap in state law particularly impacts people who belong to state-only protected categories, such as active-duty military, veterans and victims of domestic violence.

For these reasons, we ask that the Committee support this bill and vote to pass.

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ⁱ R.I. Gen. Laws § 34-37-3(17).

ⁱⁱ R.I. Gen. Laws § 34-37-4(a).

ⁱⁱⁱ R.I. Gen. Laws § 34-37-5(k).

^{iv} *DeCristo v. R.I. Comm. Human Rts.*, 1:91-cv-00657 (Oct. 23, 1992) (resolved through settlement).

^v R.I. Gen. Laws § 34-37-4(a).

^{vi} 42 U.S.C. § 3604(c); 24 C.F.R. § 100.50(b)(4).