

My name is Peggy Desjarlais, I am the program officer for housing and economic development policy at United Way of Rhode Island. I would like to express my enthusiastic support for House Bill No. 7062 and its proposed changes to Rhode Island's law on accessory dwelling units. Allowing ADUs by right is an important step towards increasing the number of accessible and affordable homes in every community.

ADUs have been called "in-law apartments" and "granny flats" in the past because of the popular use of the ADU as a home for elderly or aging relatives. The value for senior Rhode Islanders is unquestionable:

1. ADUs are typically owned and managed by homeowners who live on the premises, suggesting a more personal relationship that supports a senior's choice to age in place. Homeowner landlords often charge at or below market rate for a senior tenant in exchange for the security of rent from a tenant on fixed income.
2. ADUs represent an affordable rental choice in single-family neighborhoods, which typically contain no studio or one-bedroom housing options.
3. New-construction ADUs can be created with "universal design," an architectural principal that builds accessibility into the structure. Zero-step entrances and doorways, and hallways and bathrooms that are accessible to people with mobility differences are examples of "universal design."

ADUs bring seniors into their communities, rather than sequestered at congregate facilities. I am a strong proponent of inter-generational communities because I have benefitted from living with an older relative as a young adult. The stability and guidance I was offered during that time was so valuable for me, and it doesn't hurt to have a teenager to bring in the groceries and shovel the driveway.

ADUs aren't only for seniors, they also offer young people entry-level housing choices. Young adults at the beginning of their careers have been steadily priced out of homeownership in Rhode Island, and many struggle to find homes close to their families. By allowing for ADUs by right, young people can begin their adult lives while staying close to the communities that raised them.

The bill proposes a change to zoning law allowing ADUs by right in a way that protects the prospective homeowner from municipal zoning restrictions while balancing the need for compliance with municipal building code requirements. The changes put forth in the bill align with the values of responsible development:

1. ADUs by right, as proposed in this bill, preserve the character of Rhode Island neighborhoods because their construction either requires a lot of 20 thousand square feet OR maintains the existing footprint of the primary structure. This promises that ADUs will not crowd a densely populated neighborhood or destroy the charm of a historic farmhouse.
2. This bill allows ADUs by right on owner-occupied property, so there is no development that goes on without the homeowner's choice and none of the risks of absentee landlords. This also allows just ONE accessory dwelling unit, which limits the community discomforts of construction and disruption to a single unit. Small units require a smaller scope of work to construct and maintain, and have a similarly limited environmental footprint.

In conclusion, I wholeheartedly endorse the bill's changes to the law to allowing ADUs by right. I recognize the potential for ADUs to add much needed accessible, affordable homes to Rhode Island's housing stock, and I hope you see the potential before you.