



March 19th, 2024

The Honorable Representative Stephen M. Casey  
Chair of the House Municipal Government and Housing Committee  
Rhode Island General Assembly  
82 Smith Street  
Providence, RI 02903

RE: Support for H 7987

Dear Chairman Casey and Honorable Members of the Committee,

Reclaim Rhode Island supports H 7987, which would ensure that tenants are informed about minimum housing code violations and associated minimum housing court hearings that affect their homes. This amendment to our housing maintenance and occupancy code helps realize every tenant's **right to habitability** in their homes, and we therefore consider it part of the **Tenant Bill of Rights**.

We would like to emphasize that landlords are *already* obligated by Rhode Island law to notify tenants of minimum housing code violations (R.I. Gen. Laws § 34-18-22.1). However, such notification rarely occurs. Since 1988, Rhode Island tenants have been entitled to this information, which directly impacts tenants' daily life, health, and safety. We call upon you to pass H 7987 and ensure that tenants actually receive it.

Every single day, we work with Rhode Island tenants living in substandard housing—that is, in housing with persistent minimum housing code violations. Broken windows and doors, no heat, rat infestations, holes in the wall, lead paint hazards, water pouring in through the ceiling and left to mold—we see all this and more regularly across the state. This is a public health crisis, and H 7987 is an important step towards correcting it.

In the last year, we have made a special effort to work with code enforcement agencies and municipal housing courts to involve tenants in the code enforcement process. The result has been better outcomes: that is, more units brought into compliance. Code inspectors and municipal

judges have appreciated our work because they often face difficulties fulfilling the purpose of their office due to landlord absenteeism and lack of cooperation. (By contrast, when tenants fail to appear at eviction court, a default judgment is entered against them.) When tenants can track the progression of code violations—from first to second notice of violation, and, if uncorrected, to municipal court—they can help ensure that inspectors and judges are aware of on-the-ground conditions. We can report that, in some cases, municipal judges were outraged by discrepancies between landlord reports of progress and tenant experience of conditions. Tenant involvement in uncorrected health and safety violations is urgently needed. The benefits of such involvement were recently documented by Nina Sparling of The Public's Radio.

This legislation negatively impacts the bottom line of law-breaking landlords only. Law-abiding landlords will be unaffected. We all know that things break and code violations happen. Any landlord who is correcting code violations according to the timeline set by their city or town has nothing to fear. On the other hand, landlords who defer required maintenance and defy the orders of their city or town will be held accountable to improve their properties. No one deserves to live in unsafe housing and no one likes to have neglected properties in their neighborhood.

Many tenants do not report code violations because they fear illegal but nonetheless common retaliation by landlords. This plainly puts tenants' health and safety at risk. That is why we urge you to pass the entire **Tenant Bill of Rights**, which alongside H 7987 includes **the right to counsel** (you need full legal representation to demonstrate landlord retaliation should it occur), **the right to organize** (to combat patterns of landlord neglect and abuse across units and buildings), and **just cause eviction protections** (securing your tenancy from arbitrary and retaliatory eviction, including economic eviction).

Please stand with Rhode Island tenants and pass H 7987 and the Tenant Bill of Rights. Thank you very much for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Reclaim RI