

4/10/25

The Honorable Stephen Casey  
Chair, House Committee on Municipal Government & Housing  
Rhode Island State House  
Providence, RI 02903

**Re: Opposition to House bill H5268, *Act Relating to Towns and Cities – Home-Fit Dwelling Units***

Dear Chair Casey and Esteemed Members of the Committee:

My name is Vanessa Volz and I am the President and CEO of Sojourner House. Today I am writing in respectful ***opposition to House Bill 5268 – Home-Fit Dwelling Units***, which would require that all new construction of “covered dwellings” comply with certain design provisions aimed to enhance accessibility in residential dwelling units. While I acknowledge the bill’s intent, I must oppose this legislation due to concerns myself and my team have regarding its broad language, misalignment to current federal and state accessibility standards, potential to delay construction timelines and increase costs, and highly punitive measures.

As an agency, we are committed to fighting for a solution to our state’s affordable housing crisis; knowing all too well the devastating impact it has had on our community. Many of our clients— all victims of domestic violence, sexual assault, or human trafficking— have been put in impossible situations where they must decide between stable housing or freedom from violence. We’re doing all that we can to ease this burden and ensure that housing is never a barrier to safety. We have three housing programs— a transitional housing program, a rapid re-housing program, and a permanent supportive housing program— and in 2021, we even made the decision to undertake housing development work of our own. Now we own or lease more than 150 housing units across RI. In 2024 alone, we provided supportive housing to 489 Rhode Islanders and helped them remain housed and receive care while working to rebuild their lives.

All that to say, we know that the need for affordable housing is greater than ever in Rhode Island, and we’re worried about the potential ramifications this bill will have on future production.

Below, I have outlined more specifically some of the concerns about the unintended consequences of this legislation:

- **Overly broad language and applicability**
  - Specifically, the bill makes a circular reference to what is a “covered dwelling unit,” referencing units that are subject to the provisions of the bill.

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- The bill includes very broad definitions of “public financial assistance” which could be applied to almost any housing project, but will especially impact affordable housing development.
- **Design standards**
  - The bill refers to “design provisions” as Type A Units as defined in §1103 of ANSI 2017 standards. In 45-24.8-3(a) it sets the requirement that a minimum of twenty-five percent (25%) of units shall follow Type A standards, in (b), it requires that the first floor of a “multi-story building” (which could be interpreted as a two-or three story single family home) must comply with Type A and requires that second and higher-floor units must be Type B adaptable units. It is not clear which standard is superior.
  - The requirements represent a significant shift from existing federal and state building code standards without consideration for timeline to implementation (requirements are effective upon passage) and significant cost increases to produce these units which could lead to a reduction of units produced.
- **Implementation and enforcement**
  - There are important questions regarding applicability, implementation and enforcement that require clarification.
  - How do the requirements of the bill align to current building code and the process for review and approval? The legislation establishes a different process for review and approval, without making clear how a developer would be expected to interface with multiple distinct processes - at a time when it’s clear the state should be moving to streamline production.
  - The implementation and compliance are likely to lead to delays in construction and drive up costs.
- **Punitive measures**
  - There is a broad definition of “person” responsible for design and construction that could lead to 1) lack of clarity about the responsible party, and 2) could involve multiple people or entities, including those involved with original design/construction or subsequent renovations, including individual homeowners and private contractors.
  - A person or organization who is “harmed” by noncompliance can bring a cause of action up to three years after the discovery of noncompliance. This means it could be years after the unit is constructed, during which time a developer and potentially anyone else involved with the unit’s design and construction are



vulnerable to a lawsuit, and if found in violation, liable for damages *and* to bring the unit to compliance. Because the statute also applies to renovations, it has the potential to impact individual property owners of existing units.

For these reasons, I respectfully oppose H5268. I am happy to answer any questions the Committee might have and can be reached at [vvolz@sojournerri.org](mailto:vvolz@sojournerri.org).

Sincerely,

**Vanessa Volz**

President and CEO

Sojourner House

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