

H. Philip West Jr.

March 17, 2026

The Honorable M. Casey, Chair
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON MUNICIPAL GOVERNMENT AND HOUSING
Support [26-H 8021](#)

Thank you, Chair Casey. I'm H. Philip West Jr. I'm 84 and have retired from serving as volunteer lobbyist for the Village Common of Rhode Island, so I speak today as a private citizen.

First a word of thanks to you, Chair Casey, Vice Chairs Fogarty and Speakman, and to this entire committee, for the work you've done over these years. You've enacted an amazing body of housing legislation that Rhode Island desperately needs. This has been hard work, but the results are starting to show. You really are making life better for thousands of people who may never know your names.

Four years ago you passed legislation that required Rhode Island Housing to create an [online database of apartments for low-income households](#). I spent time this week checking [apartments in Pawtucket](#), where I live. I found many that include handicap-accessibility symbols and detailed information about no-step entry, 32" doorways, and other features.

I particularly want to thank Representative Stewart and Representative Spears for their diligent work over the years and on the accessibility bills before you today. I testify in hopes that this committee will recommend 26-H 8021 for passage. Developers can do this, but they won't do so until you require them to meet these specific standards.

The most significant change in 8021 from last year's legislation is expanding the accessibility requirement from new homes constructed *with public subsidies* to "all new single-family construction, townhouse construction, and multi-family construction which does not include an elevator as part of its overall design..." (page 2/lines 6ff).

This year's legislation also: (1) requires American National Standards Institute Type B standards, (2) sets up a process for resolving disputes, and (3) bars local permitting authorities from issuing permits or certificates of occupancy for dwellings that fail to comply.

I dedicate my testimony to the memory of Penny Faich (photo below and [more photos online](#)). Penny survived childhood polio and was raised in an orphanage because her parents couldn't afford to care for her. Despite those hardships, she became a prize-winning glass artist, and she made a decent income by creating and selling unique glass buttons.



Several times when I encouraged you to pass earlier versions of this legislation, I've mentioned a friend coming to visit my wife and me in her motorized wheelchair. We had just moved into a condo we love when our phone rang. Penny was outside but couldn't get to our door. There were three steps up from the parking area to our back door, and we couldn't lift her scooter.

In the years since then, we visited her many times in her home. She died last June without ever getting into ours.

Our condominium was built in 2005 by a developer who could have graded the parking lot to create accessible rear entrances for people in wheelchairs. Accessibility would have been easy, but it was not required in law, and our developer – like countless others – built condos with five steps in front and three in back.

This legislation will make a real difference for older adults. A [2023 white paper from the U.S. Census Bureau](#) reminds readers: “Of the 37 million older households in the United States, 4.1 million had difficulty using some feature of the home. The most common difficulty was entering the home...” (page 5).

A [2022 Harvard study](#) noted that “Less than half of adults who rely on a mobility aid such as a wheelchair or walker live in a home that has both a no-step entry or ramp and a bedroom and bathroom on the main level.” The report concluded: “Disabilities are most common among households with older residents, increasing the need for accessibility features in these homes” (page 7). The report urged policymakers and planners to “promote universal design features in new housing, so that it will provide a good housing fit for the largest range of occupants possible...” (page 17).

We know the need for homes that are accessible to older adults will grow steadily in coming years. Census data project [an increase in Rhode Island's population 75 and older from 9% today to 14% in 2040](#).

Requiring builders to include ground floor accessible units will mean fewer falls and years more independent living. The accessibility requirements in 8021 for new home construction will avoid the higher costs for remediation later, and they will slow increases in taxpayer costs for assisted living or nursing home care.

Representative Stewart's legislation will save lives and money. Please send it to the full House for consideration.

With warm thanks to all of you for getting this done in 2026,



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