

Chair Stephen M. Casey
House Committee on Municipal
Government & Housing
Rhode Island State House

March 31, 2026



RE: Testimony in support of H8036, Restoring Options in Occupancy Models (Room) Act

Dear Chair Casey and Members of the Committee:

Our testimony today is written in **strong support of House Bill 8036** that seeks to expand possible solutions to our affordable housing shortage by reinstating the single room occupancy (SROs) model in Rhode Island. For 50 years, Sojourner House, a non-profit based in Providence but now providing housing and wraparound services across the state, has served thousands of victims and survivors of domestic abuse, sexual violence, and human trafficking.

The decline of single-room occupancies (SROs) has placed a severe burden on homelessness in Rhode Island and across the country.ⁱ Had SROs continued to grow alongside the rest of the housing market, we would now have enough units to “house every American experiencing homelessness...more than three times overⁱ.” Further, as SROs have disappeared, homelessness has surged nationwide and Rhode Island is no exception.ⁱ

SROs historically provided unmatched affordability which adjusted to 2025 dollars, tenants paid just under \$250 per month allowing people with very limited income to maintain stable housing.ⁱ Their decline was driven largely by stereotypes about low-income individuals, which informed policies banning or converting SROs.ⁱ These biases continue to shape housing policy today by limiting where homeless individuals can exist through encampment bans, hostile architecture, and other measures.ⁱⁱ

The lack of affordable housing has real-world consequences for the clients we serve. Between 80% and 92% of homeless women have experienced sexual or physical violence, and half report homelessness directly resulting from domestic violence.^{iii,iv,v,vi} Further, as Zufferey and colleagues (2016) discuss, “safe and appropriate housing and the economic resources to maintain it are two of the most pressing concerns for women wanting to escape IPV” (intimate partner violence) (p.466) and can be a barrier that defines decisions in staying, leaving, or returning to a situation of abuse.^{vii,viii} Without addressing domestic violence as a leading issue affecting and affected by housing, our ability to ensure “Rhode Islanders have the opportunity to thrive” by “safeguarding the health of their homes” is not a reasonable goal.^{ix}

Many extremely low-income individuals who cycle in and out of homelessness rely on nightly motels and hotels, which provide **no** tenant protections and expose residents to higher risk of violence, eviction, and unexpected rate increases.^x Last year, we were unable to support almost 90% of the approximately 1,500 individuals seeking housing to flee domestic violence and abuse. The shortage of affordable, supportive housing can force survivors into unsafe situations, creating a cycle of risk, violence, and instability.

H8036 provides a practical solution. By legally enabling SRO and co-living arrangements, the bill expands affordable housing stock while protecting tenants through written co-living occupancy agreements. These

agreements function similarly to leases under Rhode Island law, guaranteeing tenants' rights related to rent, eviction, maintenance, and habitability which are protections that are particularly critical for vulnerable populations.

Thank you for your time and consideration. Please support House Bill H8036 to **increase affordable housing, protect tenants, and provide stability for our most vulnerable Rhode Islanders.**

ⁱ How states and cities decimated Americans' lowest-cost housing option: The intertwined history on single-room occupancy and homelessness in the U.S. (17 July, 2025). Pew Research. Retrieved from: <https://www.pew.org/en/research-and-analysis/issue-briefs/2025/07/how-states-and-cities-decimated-americans-lowest-cost-housing-option>

ⁱⁱ Hancock, A. M. (2004). *The politics of disgust: The identity of the welfare queen*. New York University Press.

ⁱⁱⁱ Bullock, H. E., Reppond, H. A., Truong, S. V., & Singh, M. R. (2020). An intersectional analysis of the feminization of homelessness and mothers' housing precarity. *Journal of Social Issues*, 76, 835-858. <https://doi.org/10.1111/josi.12406>

^{iv} National Low Income Housing Coalition (2020, June 10). Domestic violence. <https://nlihc.org/resource/domestic-violence>

^v Pavao, J., Alvarez, J., Baumrind, N., Induni, M., & Kimerling, R. (2007). Intimate partner violence and housing instability. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 32(2), 143-146. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.amepre.2006.10.008>

^{vi} Zapata, A. Wood, L. G., Galvin, A. M., Chan, W., Thomas, T. A., Tsai, J., Way, H. K., Mueller, E. J., & Hernandez, D. C. (2025). Domains of housing instability and intimate partner violence risk among U.S. tenants. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 22, 1212. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph22081212>

^{vii} Melbin, Sullivan, & Cain, 2003 IN Ponio, P., Varcoe, C., Davies, L., Ford-Gilboe, M., Wuest, J., & Hammerton, J. (2011). Leaving ≠ moving: Housing patterns of women who have left an abusive partner. *Violence Against Women*, 17(12), 1576-1600. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801211436163>

^{viii} Zufferey, C., Chung, D., Franzway, S., Wendt, S., & Noulding, M. (2016). Intimate partner violence and housing: Eroding women's citizenship. *Journal of Women and Social Work*, 31(4), 463-478. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886109915626213>

^{ix} Housing Works Rhode Island (2025, July). 2025 Housing Fact Book.

https://stdidhousingworksriprod.blob.core.windows.net/housingworksri/documents/Housing-Fact-Books/HWRI_HFB25.pdf

^x Kiebler, J. M. (2024). Neoliberalism, capitalism, and marginalized women's experiences of mistreatment. *Deep Blue*. <https://dx.doi.org/10.7302/23881>