



INSTITUTE FOR JUSTICE

March 31, 2026

House Committee on Municipal Government and Housing
Room 101
Rhode Island State House
82 Smith Street
Providence, Rhode Island 02903

Re: Institute for Justice testimony in support of H 8036 (ROOM Act)

Chair Casey, Vice Chairs Fogarty and Speakman, and Members of the Committee:

My name is Samuel Hooper. I am Legislative Counsel at the Institute for Justice (IJ), a nonprofit law firm that works nationwide to defend property rights and remove barriers to housing opportunity. Through strategic litigation in courthouses and advocacy in statehouses, IJ's Zoning Justice Project seeks to reform restrictive zoning and land-use regulations that limit housing supply at a time of shortage.¹

I write in strong support of H 8036, the ROOM Act, which would legalize co-living or shared housing in areas that are zoned for multifamily, commercial, or mixed uses, while removing regulatory barriers that make it difficult to offer individual rooms as a lawful housing option. IJ supports this bill because it restores a longstanding, naturally affordable form of housing and allows property owners to use their property to meet clear demand for lower cost living arrangements.

Rhode Island's housing shortage is not just a product of a failure to build, but also of what kinds of housing our laws allow people to create and live in. At present, one of the most naturally affordable forms of housing—co-living, also sometimes known as single room occupancy (SRO) housing—is effectively unavailable across much of the state because of zoning and related regulatory constraints.

For much of American history, shared housing arrangements were a common and unremarkable part of the housing market. In the early 20th century, a substantial share of urban residents either lived in residential hotels, rented a room in someone else's home or rented out a room themselves, and as recently as the 1950s, SROs accounted for roughly a tenth of rental housing in major cities.² The decline of these arrangements did not reflect a disappearance of demand, but rather the cumulative effect of increasingly restrictive zoning and building codes that made this form of housing difficult or impossible to provide.

The disappearance of this lowest-cost housing option has had predictable consequences. When shared housing was widely available, it provided an accessible entry

¹ Institute for Justice – Zoning Justice Project: <https://ij.org/issues/zoning-justice/>

² Brian J. Sullivan and Jonathan Burke, "Single-Room Occupancy Housing in New York City: The Origins and Dimensions of a Crisis," *City University of New York Law Review* 17, no. 1 (2013), <https://academicworks.cuny.edu/clar/vol17/iss1/5/>



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point into stable housing for individuals who could not afford a full apartment; as that option has been curtailed, many of those same individuals have been left with few alternatives. Research has found that a significant portion of individuals entering homeless shelters were previously living in SRO housing, underscoring the role that this form of housing once played in preventing housing instability.³

Today, co-living continues to function as one of the most affordable housing options available, with rents typically lower than both traditional apartments and single-family homes. At the same time, new opportunities have emerged to expand supply in ways that were not previously feasible. For example, research conducted by the nonpartisan Pew Trusts in partnership with the architecture firm Gensler has found that underutilized office buildings can often be converted into co-living housing more efficiently and at lower cost than into conventional apartments, with projected rents in the range of approximately \$700 to \$1,000 per month, often including utilities.⁴

Importantly, this is a form of affordability that does not depend on ongoing public subsidy. It arises from allowing space to be used more efficiently and from permitting property owners to respond to clear and persistent demand for lower-cost living arrangements.

A number of states have already begun to move in this direction, including Washington, Oregon, Texas, Colorado, New Hampshire, and Hawaii, each of which has adopted reforms (including elements of the ROOM Act) that expand the availability of shared housing options. Crucially, these reforms have not produced the kinds of negative outcomes that are sometimes anticipated; rather, they have allowed additional housing options to come online in a way that is responsive to local conditions and market demand.

The ROOM Act would take a similar step in Rhode Island by restoring the ability to provide this form of housing in areas that already have the infrastructure to support it, and subject to the kinds of generally applicable standards that govern other residential uses. In doing so, it would reintroduce an option that historically played an important role in making housing accessible to a wide range of residents.

This bill does not recreate the substandard tenements of a century ago, nor does it exempt co-living housing from ordinary health and safety requirements. Building codes, fire safety standards, and generally applicable occupancy and nuisance laws will continue to apply, just as they do for any other residential use. What the bill addresses is not safety regulation, but the categorical prohibition on a lawful and historically common way of living.

³ Rebecca Baird-Remba and Alex Horowitz, “How States and Cities Decimated Americans’ Lowest-Cost Housing Option,” <https://www.pew.org/en/research-and-analysis/issue-briefs/2025/07/how-states-and-cities-decimated-americans-lowest-cost-housing-option>

⁴ Alex Horowitz and Tushar Kansal, “Converting Obsolete Offices to Small Co-Living Apartments Could Help Ease U.S. Housing Shortage,” <https://www.pew.org/en/research-and-analysis/articles/2026/03/24/converting-obsolete-offices-to-small-co-living-apartments-could-help-ease-us-housing-shortage>



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For these reasons, the Institute for Justice respectfully urges the committee to support H 8036. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

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