

April 24, 2025

The Honorable Evan P. Shanley, Chair
House State Government and Elections
Rhode Island State House
82 Smith Street
Providence, RI 02903

RE: BILL NUMBER H-5611 – AN ACT RELATING TO PUBLIC PROPERTY AND WORKS -- PUBLIC BUILDINGS

Chair Shanley and Honorable Committee Members,

On behalf of the Rhode Island League of Cities and Towns, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on House Bill 5611, which would require the installation of universal changing stations in newly constructed or significantly renovated public buildings and places of public accommodation beginning in 2027.

We begin by expressing our strong appreciation for the intent of this legislation. The League and its member municipalities are committed to advancing accessibility, dignity, and inclusion for individuals with disabilities and their families. Universal changing stations address a real and growing need in our communities and reflect a compassionate, equity-focused policy objective that we support and value.

That said, we respectfully submit this testimony to highlight practical concerns related to the implementation of the bill, particularly potential unintended consequences for Rhode Island's cities and towns. In order for this initiative to be successful, thoughtful consideration must be given to its fiscal and operational impacts on local governments.

Fiscal and Operational Concerns

Many municipalities are already navigating significant budget constraints while maintaining core infrastructure and essential services. As currently written, House Bill 5611 would create an unfunded mandate, requiring potentially costly building modifications without providing accompanying financial support.

The costs associated with installation, compliance, and ongoing maintenance will vary by facility size and layout but could be substantial, particularly for smaller communities or those with older public buildings. For this legislation to be successful, these local realities must be addressed. We respectfully urge careful consideration of the potential fiscal impact this bill may have on municipal budgets and service priorities.

State-Local Coordination and Support

In addition to flexibility and clarity, we urge that House Bill 5611 be amended to require the Department of Administration to collaborate with municipalities in identifying and addressing circumstances where compliance would create unforeseen financial or logistical challenges. A cooperative, consultative approach would help ensure successful implementation and allow municipalities to align their efforts with state expectations.

Furthermore, when adopting regulations related to this legislation, the Department of Administration should engage municipalities early in the rulemaking process and take into account factors such as building feasibility, cost impact, and local capacity. This coordination will be essential for the initiative to be successful and equitable.

Financial Assistance and Grant Programs

Finally, we respectfully request that the General Assembly provide state-level financial support to help municipalities meet the requirements of this legislation. Installing universal changing stations often requires significant upfront costs for equipment, construction, plumbing, and electrical work, along with ongoing maintenance and staffing considerations.

For municipalities, especially those with aging infrastructure or limited capital improvement budgets, these costs represent a serious challenge. A state-administered grant program or matching fund would allow local governments to implement this policy goal in a fiscally responsible and sustainable manner. In order for this effort to be successful and equitable, all communities, regardless of size or wealth, must have access to the resources necessary for compliance.

In conclusion The League of Cities and Towns appreciates the thoughtful work of the General Assembly in pursuing a more inclusive and accessible Rhode Island. We respectfully request that House Bill 5611 be amended to address local fiscal and operational realities, while preserving its important goal. The legislation's success must be paired with clear guidance, reasonable flexibility, adequate financial support and strong state-local coordination with the Department of Administration before adopting such regulations.

Thank you for your time and consideration of our perspective.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'Randy R. Rossi'.

Randy R. Rossi
Executive Director

Cc: Honorable Members of House State Government and Elections Committee