



PROVIDENCE COLLEGE

Department of Sociology & Anthropology

Dear Members of the Rhode Island House Judiciary Committee,

I am Professor of Sociology at Providence College and a long-time advocate working to end homelessness in Rhode Island. I am currently the Interim Director of the Rhode Island Homeless Advocacy Project and the Chair of the Rhode Island Homeless Management Information System Steering Committee. I strongly support the passage of H7967 which is intended to strengthen the provisions of the Rhode Island Homeless Bill of Rights, (RI General Laws § 34-37.1-3).

At the end of February 2024 our state had over 1,600 unhoused people with 512 of them living outside without shelter. This represents an increase of over 50% in the total number of people experiencing homelessness, and an overwhelming increase from just 71 living unsheltered in pre-Covid 2019.

Rents in the state now average over \$2,000 per month. Many rents are over \$2,500 a month, requiring an income of at least \$100,000 annually to afford at 30% of income. Many landlords are evicting those who cannot afford these rents to take advantage of the hot rental market. There were 792 evictions in January of this year and 639 in February. With the loss of federal Covid funds and the lack of an adequate number of shelter beds and units affordable for very low- or no-income individuals, those unable to double-up with friends and family members have been forced outside, often into tent encampments.

A common response to tent encampments by municipalities has been to send police to harass the residents, hoping to get them to move elsewhere. Police have cut tents, kicked them in, forced people to get out of the tents and give their names without warrants. People have often had all their possessions including personal documents discarded in dumpsters. Given the lack of adequate shelter and housing alternatives, it is important to strengthen the Homeless Bill of Rights to provide remedies for those who have had their rights ignored, to reign in these illegal police actions and to force the police to adopt policies with respect to encampments that are consistent with the Homeless Bill of Rights.

Sincerely,

Eric L. Hirsch
Interim Director
Rhode Island Homeless Advocacy Project