

Testimony in support of HB7063

An Act Relating to State Affairs and Government – Rhode Island Housing and Resources Act of 1988

Accessible Housing for Persons with Disabilities

HOUSE Municipal Government

January 24th, 2024

Kavya Gopinath, Policy Analyst, Economic Progress Institute

The Economic Progress Institute supports Representative Tina Spears' HB7073, which incorporates universal design principles into new construction of low- and moderate-income housing to provide greater accessibility for persons with disabilities.

According to the RI Department of Health, approximately 13% of Rhode Island residents, not including the elderly, have a mobility related disability such that they might need accessible housing¹. A study conducted by the US Department of Housing and Urban Development found that the national need for accessible housing is growing due to an increasing older population with ambulatory limitations and a desire to grow old in their own homes. However, the US housing stock is not currently accessible to people with disabilities². Implementing universal design principles would increase accessibility, inclusivity, and safety for a significant number of people. Rhode Islanders value fairness and safe housing for all our residents – including the disabled.

Universal design principles include accessibility, inclusivity, adaptability, safety, and wayfinding. This would mean building ramps, elevators, wheelchair accessible entrances and exits throughout the housing unit, and appropriate signage to help with navigating through the unit. Housing units would be inclusive of persons with sensory, cognitive, or mobility impairments, as well as children, seniors, and other vulnerable populations. Housing units should also be easily adaptable to the unique needs of residents, including flexible room layouts and adjustable fixtures. Ensuring safety through handrails, non-slip surfaces, and emergency exits is also a key feature of this bill.

Although this bill is an important step in the right direction, the Economic Progress Institute recognizes that more needs to be done for the disabled community. While having an elevator is important, disabled persons might feel more comfortable living on the first floor, so they have the option of evacuating safely and independently in the case of an emergency. If disabled persons are placed on higher floors, fire departments must have a plan in place for safe and timely evacuation. The state should also consider building a range of housing options, including apartments and houses, for disabled residents. We urge legislators to continue conversations about how to make housing truly accessible to all Rhode Islanders.

¹ [Disability and Health Among Adults 18-64 Years Old \(Rhode Island Department of Health\)](#)

² [Assessing the Accessibility of America's Housing Stock for Physically Disabled Persons | HUD USER](#)

HB7063 would improve equity in Rhode Island by making low- and moderate-income housing safer and more accessible for the disabled community, who have been historically marginalized. The Economic Progress Institute strongly supports this HB7063.