

The Village Common of Rhode Island

Aging Better Together

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON MUNICIPAL GOVERNMENT AND HOUSING

The Honorable Stephen M. Casey, Chair

Testimony by H. Philip West, Jr., on January 25, 2024,

in support of 24-H 7063 by Rep. Spears, et. al.,

Adding Universal Design Principles to the Housing Resources Act of 1998

Thank you, Chairman Casey and members of the House Committee on Municipal Government and Housing for this hearing. I testify on behalf of The Village Common of Rhode Island in support of 24-H 7063 by Rep. Tina Spears, legislation that would add Universal Design Principles as a new section of RIGL 42-128, the Rhode Island Housing Resources Act of 1998.


My name is H. Philip West, Jr., and I serve as a volunteer lobbyist on behalf of The Village Common of Rhode Island, a statewide non-profit that deploys a wide array of volunteer supports to help older adults live safely and independently in homes they love. We coordinate crucial services through six locally organized and operated villages in Barrington, Burrillville, Cranston, Glocester, Providence/Pawtucket, and Westerly. Since I testified before you last year, we have been organizing in several additional local communities, and we have focused on two groups that have been isolated and need intentional support: (1) A Southside Providence Village is being organized with an active Spanish-speaking caregiver support group whose participants have roots in the Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Venezuela, Columbia, and Argentina, and (2) A non-geographical gathering of aging LGBTQ+ members and their allies is forming a "Pride Circle." All told, the Village Common now has 445 members and 276 volunteers. We believe our volunteer-centered approach enhances lives, strengthens communities, and saves money.

We support Rep. Spears's proposal to require that new low-and moderate-income housing be developed with Universal Design Principles. Universal Design is an approach to architecture that aims to create buildings, environments, and services that are equally accessible to the largest number of people possible. On Page 1/lines 4-7, Rep. Spears proposes to improve the "current accessibility requirements" in all newly constructed low- and moderate-income housing with functional design principles. These principles appear as bracketed numbers in 7063: (1) **Uniform accessibility**/lines 9-15; (2) **Inclusivity**/lines 16-18; (3) **Adaptability**/page 2, lines 1-3; (4) **Safety**/page 2, lines 4-5; and (5) **Wayfinding**/page 2, lines 6-7.

As life expectancy rises and Rhode Island's population ages, injuries and health crises disrupt the ability of many older adults to stay safely in homes they love. Older people increasingly share struggles previously associated with those who were considered "disabled." We now know that a health crisis can make it suddenly difficult or impossible for an older adult to function in an otherwise adequate apartment. New physical impairments force individuals from their homes into vastly more expensive assisted living institutions or nursing homes.

The Village Common believes that if Rhode Island begins designing low- and moderate-income apartments in accord with Universal Design Principles, (1) more older adults will live independently into their later years, (2) their ability to live independently will increase their quality of life, and (3) taxpayers will pay less for long-term care. Universal Design Principles will not force current owners to retrofit their properties but will steadily increase the availability of accessible homes for older adults. It will prove far less expensive to build new homes with Universal Design Principles than to renovate or retrofit these apartments during occupants' inevitable times of health crisis. On behalf of the Village Common of Rhode Island, I respectfully urge you to approve 7063 for passage.

Respectfully,



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