

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 March 7, 2024,
in support of 24-H 7377 by Rep. Jennifer Stewart, et. al.,
Rhode Island Inclusive Home Design Act

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 7377 by Representatives Stewart, Handy, Cortvriend, Felix, Cruz, Boylan, Alzate, Tanzi, and Kazarian. This legislation would require that at least one floor of new dwellings that are built with any government subsidies be “visitable.”**

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 helps older adults live safely and independently in homes they love. Across Rhode Island, our locally organized and operated villages provide helpful volunteers. Our volunteer-centered approach enhances lives, strengthens communities, and saves money.

The Village Common strongly supports Rep. Stewart’s legislation to require “visitability” on at least one floor of new dwellings built with federal, state, or local subsidies. This means people in wheelchairs or on motorized scooters must be able to enter without hinderance or humiliation.

Seven years ago, my wife and I downsized to a cozy condominium in Pawtucket. Our new condo was built in 2005. It gave us convenience, comfort, light, and safety, but within weeks of our arrival a friend came for a visit on her motorized scooter. Our front door has five steps up, our back door only three, but we could not lift and bring her inside. Later, we figured out how the developer could have graded the parking area for access that would have welcomed our friend into our home.

Rep. Stewart’s bill references national accessibility standards and credible tools for civil enforcement, either by individuals or the attorney general.

The American National Standards Institute (ANSI), which Rep. Stewart incorporates by reference, is a nonprofit that has been doing this work since 1918. The ANSI doesn’t actually create the standards but focuses on bringing together stakeholders to standardize building codes. These standards have greatly improved fire safety, structural design, accessibility, and energy efficiency. As Rep. Stewart’s legislation indicates, this process evolves constantly. In fact, on page 1/line 13 and on page 3/line 13, 7377 references the standards from 2009, but in 2017 the ANSI published a newer iteration of the “visitability” standards, so it will be important to update that reference.

As life expectancy rises and Rhode Island’s population ages, injuries and health crises inevitability disrupt the ability of many older adults to stay safely in their homes. Older people increasingly share struggles previously associated with those who were considered “disabled.” New physical impairments force individuals out of their homes into vastly more expensive assisted living or nursing homes.

The “visitability” requirements in 7377 will not force current owners to retrofit their properties but will steadily increase the number of visitable homes for older adults as new homes are built.

We in the Village Common strongly believe that if Rhode Island law requires that all new apartments built with public subsidies be “visitable” in compliance with these national standards: (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.

Respectfully,



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