

## JOCELYN P. ANTONIO, MPH

**Testimony on H-5665, Homeless Bill of Rights  
House Municipal Government & Housing Committee  
April 2, 2025**

Good afternoon, Chairperson Casey and members of the House Municipal Government & Housing Committee. My name is Jocelyn Antonio, and I serve as the Director of Program Implementation and Policy at the Hassenfeld Child Health Innovation Institute at the Brown University School of Public Health. I am providing this testimony in my personal capacity as a public health professional.

**I urge your favorable support and passage of H-5665 – An Act Relating to Property – Homeless Bill of Rights**, sponsored by Representative Stewart and co-sponsored by Representatives Craven, J. Lombardi, Donovan, Edwards, Tanzi, Alzate, Kazarian, Morales, and Speakman.

This legislation updates and strengthens Rhode Island's Homeless Bill of Rights by affirming the dignity and civil rights of individuals experiencing homelessness. It includes meaningful protections, such as:

- Strengthening enforcement and remedies for rights violations;
- Clear limitations on police authority to enter encampment tents without a warrant;
- Required notice and meaningful relocation planning before an encampment displacement.

However, I respectfully urge the committee to amend the language in § 34-37.1-4(c), which currently places the burden on the victim to prove intent. This threshold is unnecessarily high and shifts responsibility away from the violator. The burden of proof should not fall on the person whose rights were violated.

**In 2024, 2,442 Rhode Islanders experienced homelessness—a 35% increase from 2023. Alarming, 950 were families with children or unaccompanied youth.<sup>1</sup> Rhode Island also has the second highest rate of chronic homelessness in the nation!<sup>2</sup>**

It is estimated that about 40-60% of Rhode Islanders experiencing homelessness are working poor, often in low-wage jobs.<sup>3,4</sup> The current state minimum wage is \$15 per hour, amount to \$31,200 annually pre-tax for full-time workers. Yet, according to the Economic Progress Institute, a single adult in Rhode Island needs \$48,824 annually pre-tax (\$23.47/hr) to meet their basic needs.<sup>5</sup> For a single-parent family with two children, the required income jumps to \$99,418 (\$47.80/hr). Even with full-time work, thousands are unable to afford housing in a state where rents are high and public transit is limited.

Being unhoused is not a personal failure.

As early as 1991, the United Nations recognized **“the right to adequate housing” as a fundamental human right.**<sup>6</sup> We must acknowledge homelessness for what it truly is: **a public health issue.** People experiencing homelessness have high rates of chronic mental and physical health conditions, co-occurring disorders, and barriers to care. **Children facing homelessness are at increased risk for toxic stress, developmental challenges, and higher health care utilization** – costs affect our entire system when not addressed early.<sup>6</sup>

We must also adopt standardized shelter regulations to reduce these harms, including:

- **Safe and sanitary conditions:** Clean hygiene facilities reduce disease spread.
- **Adequate space and ventilation:** Prevent overcrowding and protect respiratory health.
- **Integrated support services:** Connect individuals to immediate care and long-term recovery pathways.

I respectfully urge your **strong consideration and passage of House Bill 5102**. This legislation is a **vital step in protecting the health and well-being of Rhode Island's most vulnerable residents**. Let's affirm that **housing is a human right**- backed by policies that reflect that value.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

**Jocelyn P. Antonio, MPH**

**joantoni@bu.edu**

## **Reference:**

1. Shea, C. Latest census reveals 35% increase in unhoused people in Rhode Island • Rhode Island Current. *Rhode Island Current* <https://rhodeislandcurrent.com/2024/06/27/latest-census-reveals-35-increase-in-unhoused-people-in-rhode-island/> (2024).
2. Caracciolo. Rhode Island has second highest percentage of chronic homelessness in country. *WJAR 10* <https://turnto10.com/news/local/rhode-island-homeless-population-double-the-national-average-point-in-time-count> (2025).
3. Council for the Homeless. Myths & Facts about Homelessness | Council For The Homeless. <https://www.councilforthehomeless.org/myths-facts-about-homelessness/> (2017).
4. Crossroads Rhode Island. Insights, Facts, & Figures. *Crossroads Rhode Island* <https://www.crossroadsri.org/housing-services/strategy-solutions/insights-facts-figures> (2025).
5. The Economic Progress Institute. *The 2024 Rhode Island Standard of Need*. [https://rhodeislandcurrent.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/RISN\\_2024\\_web\\_14.pdf](https://rhodeislandcurrent.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/RISN_2024_web_14.pdf) (2024).
6. *Housing and Homelessness as a Public Health Issue*. <https://apha.org/policies-and-advocacy/public-health-policy-statements/policy-database/2018/01/18/housing-and-homelessness-as-a-public-health-issue> (2017).