



April 2, 2025

The Honorable Stephen Casey
Chair, House Committee on Municipal Government and Housing
Rhode Island State House, 82 Smith Street, Providence RI 02903

Re: SUPPORT for H-5665 – *An Act Relating to Property – Homeless Bill of Rights*

Dear Chair Casey and Members of the Committee:

On behalf of the Housing Network of Rhode Island (HNRI), I write in support of H-5665, which updates the Homeless Bill of Rights to govern interactions pertaining to encampments and includes the right to access clean and sanitary conditions.

HNRI is the state's association of 18 nonprofit community development organizations, who are committed to serving low- and moderate-income households across Rhode Island. Several of our members serve individuals who are unhoused and/or unsheltered and whose rights would be strengthened by this legislation. We are also the backbone organization for Homes RI, a statewide coalition of 80 organizations focused on increasing the supply of safe, healthy and affordable homes.

Since 2019, homelessness in Rhode Island has increased over 130% (RI Coalition to End Homelessness, Rhode Island/HUD Point in Time Report). In November 2024, more than 650 people had spent at least one night without shelter in a two-week period, and it's unlikely that number shifted much as we moved into winter, with our state's emergency shelter system at capacity. There are not enough permanent, affordable, and available homes to meet burgeoning needs, and today's economic conditions, including high rents, static incomes, and lack of homes, are pushing more and more Rhode Islanders into homelessness. Service providers and support agencies are doing the best they can to maximize limited resources, but systemic barriers remain that prevent people from being housed and sheltered quickly enough. This unfortunate reality means that too many people are left with no options for shelter, other than sleeping in a tent. The proposed amendments to the *Homeless Bill of Rights* are timely and necessary to clarify how interactions around encampments should be governed and to help ensure understanding and compliance with the *HBoR* among public agents who might interact with unhoused residents, an important, but often overlooked, component of public safety.

More than a decade ago, Rhode Island lawmakers had the foresight to act to protect the rights of people experiencing homelessness through the *HBoR*. It is now appropriate to update and clarify some sections of this law, to preserve dignity and respect for individuals who are experiencing homelessness while ensuring public health and safety.

With Rhode Island facing an ongoing housing crisis, enacting policies like these that help reinforce housing stability, transparency and equity are essential to complement a robust housing production strategy. I encourage the Committee to advance this bill. Please feel free to contact me at (401) 721-5680 ext. 104 or mlodge@housingnetworkri.org with any questions.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Melina Lodge". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Melina Lodge, Executive Director