



# POLICY PRIORITIES

# COVID-19 RESPONSE

April, 2020



Homes RI is a coalition of organizations working together to increase and preserve the supply of safe, healthy and affordable homes throughout Rhode Island. We believe Rhode Island can and should be a state where all residents are able to live in safe, healthy and affordable homes in thriving communities.

We are in challenging times. People, and social systems, are strained. At the center of this public health emergency is the necessity for people to take care of themselves in a safe, healthy and affordable home. Too many Rhode Islanders are currently unable to do this because they are experiencing homelessness, housing insecurity, or facing impossible choices between staying in their home or taking care of other basic needs.

**We are asking our state leaders to take the following actions to stop the spread of the virus and promote housing stability now, and to prepare for the aftermath of this unprecedented pandemic:**

**Protect Rhode Islanders from evictions, foreclosures and utility shut-offs:** Ensuring that people who currently have a place to live can remain in their homes with uninterrupted access to vital utilities is a critical public health measure. We request a statewide directive that would protect tenants and homeowners from eviction and foreclosures and extend protections from utility shut offs for a minimum of 120 days after the emergency is declared over.

**Ensure financial support for tenants and property owners:** Rent and mortgage assistance should be a top priority for state and federal disaster relief funds so that tenants and homeowners are protected from homelessness. As tenants fall behind on rent due to reduced or lost incomes, landlords and property owners need additional resources during this time to maintain their buildings, pay for increased and unexpected costs due to COVID-19, and cover expenses like mortgages and property taxes. This is particularly important to protect Rhode Island's inventory of over 37,000 long-term affordable homes for low and moderate-income Rhode Islanders. We ask that available federal resources be fast-tracked for rent, mortgage, and operations assistance for tenants and property owners and that the State consider its own financial package to supplement available federal funds for housing.

**Support for people experiencing homelessness:** People experiencing homelessness already face numerous barriers to accessing quality healthcare and are at enormous risk during this pandemic. It is imperative that the state act to protect the health, safety, and ability to access services for people experiencing homelessness. While our state's shelter providers are taking every precaution at their disposal to mitigate risks of transmission, congregate settings are in direct conflict with current public health protocols. We request financial resources to ensure that people who are homeless are able to safely isolate and quarantine, and that critical amenities such as toilets, handwashing, and charging stations are made publicly accessible in communities across Rhode Island. We also request a state directive to municipalities to suspend enforcement of ordinances which impact people experiencing homelessness (such as sleeping/camping in parks) and to designate safe parking zones for people living in their cars.

**Sustained support for affordable homes:** While we are all focused on this immediate public health crisis, it is more important than ever that we act to address Rhode Island's severe housing shortage and cost-burden to residents. Housing is healthcare. We urge the Administration and General Assembly to work together to preserve the proposed housing bond and dedicated annual funding stream to build safe, healthy long-term affordable homes. We call on lawmakers to take action to eliminate unnecessary barriers to accessing secure housing, including, but not limited to, an end to housing discrimination based on a tenant's source of income or eviction history. Ensuring sustained investments in housing, particularly for low and no-income Rhode Islanders, will only strengthen our ability to recover from this public health crisis, and ensure resiliency for the next emergency that hits us.

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