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Homes RI and Housing Network react to key housing initiatives passed in '23 session

PROVIDENCE — The Housing Network of Rhode Island and Homes RI, a multi-sector housing advocacy coalition, are pleased to see the General Assembly's continued emphasis on housing reflected in key legislative initiatives and the FY24 budget.

On July 5, the Governor signed into law a package of 13 bills championed by House Speaker Joseph Shekarchi aimed at housing production and land use reform, including:

- Allowing for the adaptive reuse of certain commercial structures like factories, hospitals, offices, malls and schools into high-density residential developments.
- Creating a transit-oriented development pilot program.
- Streamlining and clarifying the permitting, application and appeal processes for housing developments.
- Requiring regular updates to comprehensive plans.

The package also contained legislation to prohibit rental application fees and allow tenants to provide their own state-issued background check and/or credit report during the screening process. The inclusion of this bill (House 6087 aa, sponsored by Rep. Cruz, and Senate 311 Sub-A sponsored by Sen. Murray) among the Speaker's priorities yielded a significant protection for prospective renters designed to curb burgeoning and often predatory fees associated with rental applications.

In addition to the application fee legislation, the General Assembly approved several more significant tenant and homeowner protections - firmly signaling that the expansion of these protections is essential to increasing housing stability while the State undertakes measures to address housing supply and affordability. These include a package of lead poisoning prevention bills backed by Attorney General Peter Neronha. One of the highlights of the AG's bill package is legislation that creates a statewide rental registry and will help enforce compliance with existing lead safety laws, among other protections for renters impacted by noncompliant landlords. A bill requiring replacement of residential lead pipes - a priority of Senate President Dominick Ruggerio - also passed, making this session an historic one for advancing policies and practices to prevent childhood lead poisoning in Rhode Island.

The General Assembly also passed legislation that provides a pathway to seal eviction records, something that has been a priority of Homes RI and many advocate partners since 2018. Legislation to extend the time on foreclosure mediation legislation also passed, which helps ensure that Rhode Islanders at risk of foreclosure can access free mediation and counseling to potentially avoid the loss of their home.

The FY24 Budget reflects the Administration and General Assembly's response to the housing crisis, and we applaud both branches of government for taking decisive action with an additional \$71.5 million investment from State Fiscal Recovery Funds in housing, homelessness services, and Housing Department infrastructure. These investments are welcome and necessary, and investments in housing should remain a top priority in future budget years as our State confronts the impacts of under-building and under-investing for the prior three decades.

Overall, the housing investments in the FY24 budget coupled with the slate of land use and housing stability legislation approved by lawmakers this session will help make housing more equitable and accessible for all Rhode Islanders. The focus on housing as a policy priority remains crucial as thousands of Rhode Islanders remain precariously housed and cost-burdened, and we thank the members of the General Assembly and Governor's Office for recognizing the existing need.

Affordable, safe and healthy homes are essential to our collective quality of life and economic prosperity. Housing Network of Rhode Island and Homes RI will continue to advocate for investments and policy tools that will prioritize the housing needs of low and moderate income Rhode Islanders and enhance the communities that make Rhode Island our home.

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The Housing Network of Rhode Island is the statewide association of nonprofit Community Development Corporations committed to the development and preservation of affordable homes and vibrant communities. Our members have built and developed thousands of affordable homes and initiated numerous revitalization efforts in neighborhoods and communities across Rhode Island. Our work includes advocating for and supporting policies that address Rhode Island's urgent affordable housing and community economic development needs.

As part of our advocacy, the Housing Network of Rhode Island facilitates **Homes RI**, a multi-sector coalition of organizations working together to increase and preserve the supply of safe, healthy and affordable homes throughout Rhode Island.

Our members: **Church Community Housing Corporation, Crossroads Rhode Island, Habitat for Humanity of Greater Providence and East Bay, East Bay Community Development, House of Hope Community Development Corporation, NeighborWorks Blackstone River Valley, Omni Development Corporation, ONE Neighborhood Builders, Pawtucket Central Falls Development, Pawtucket Housing Authority, Providence Revolving Fund, South County Habitat for Humanity, SWAP, Inc., West Elmwood Housing Development Corporation & Women's Development Corporation.**