



National
Multiple Sclerosis
Society

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Testimony in support of HB 5372, An Act Concerning Accessible Housing

Senator Gomes, Representative Green, and Distinguished Members of the Select Committee on Housing,

My name is Susan Raimondo and I am the Senior Director of Advocacy and Programs for the National Multiple Sclerosis Society, Connecticut Chapter. The National MS Society has offices in Hartford and Norwalk. We serve over 6,000 individuals living with multiple sclerosis and their families in Connecticut.

I am also the family care giver representative to the CT Long Term Care Advisory Council and I serve on the Money Follows the Person Steering Committee. I have been involved in advocacy, providing services and in policy development assisting elders and persons with disabilities for over 30 years in our state. Personally I am also impacted by the issues of accessibility and "visitability." My husband has MS and has used a wheelchair for the past 17 years.

Multiple sclerosis is a chronic disease of the central nervous system. The cause is yet unknown, and there is no cure. The symptoms—including fatigue, impaired ambulation, visual disturbances, bowel and bladder problems, cognitive changes, and more—vary from one individual to another and for any given individual over time.

MS is an often-disabling disease most often diagnosed between the ages of 20 and 50. However, MS is not a fatal disease and a vast majority of people have a normal life expectancy. When someone lives most of their life with this disease, it makes the need for "normal life" activity even more important.

Many people with multiple sclerosis rely on the technology of wheelchairs, scooters, and other devices or medical equipment to get out of the house, go to work, contribute to the community, run errands, and simply enjoy life.

The National MS Society supports HB 5372, An Act Concerning Accessible Housing. Our organization works with a number of the organizations nationally and locally here in Connecticut that are proponents of the availability of housing that is affordable and accessible.

Our colleagues at Independence Unlimited and the Disability Advocacy Collaborative of Connecticut have a few recommendations for this legislation and we would like to suggest that the Select Committee on Housing work with these groups to strengthen the bill. Their suggestions make sense and will enhance the bill.

The suggestions include:

1. Making homes "Visitable", meaning that just 3 features will make the homes more accessible to everyone
These features include:
 - One zero step entrance (could be through garage)
 - Wider hallways and doorways
 - Doorways - 32" of unobstructed passage
 - Hallways - 42" optimum
 - One bath on the main floor with room for a wheelchair
2. Focusing only in newly constructed single family or two family homes
 - Codes/laws already cover multifamily or multistory buildings
3. Need to be forward thinking about home building to meet the needs of Connecticut residents in the future
4. All reasonable public policy changes should not be governed by cost alone (although the cost of the three features noted above can be as little as \$500)

Some of the most positive aspects of this legislation are that it:

- **Allows individuals with mobility disabilities to visit the homes of family or friends, decreasing social isolation**
- **Increases social capital and neighborhood diversity**
- **Improves civic engagement and community inclusion**
- **Promotes integration of people with disabilities, including elders**
- **Decreases housing discrimination**
- **Causes a decrease in State Medicaid spending**
- **Funds could be reallocated when home modifications are not needed**
 - **nursing home care is not the only choice**
- **Increases safety and access by first responders in emergencies**

As a professional working with people with disabilities and also as a family member of someone with a physical disability, I know that one of the most frustrating and difficult parts about living with a physical disability is that individuals want to be able to participate in the community but yet there are often "significant mountains" in the way. Many of these may only be a few inches high, but they totally restrict access to participating and contributing to the community.

For people with MS, depression is a huge problem. In fact individuals with MS have a rate of suicide that is 7.5 times higher than other individuals living with illnesses.

One of the most common ways to help alleviate some of the situational depression in people with MS is to reduce social isolation. Yet we know of many individuals who remain isolated simply because they cannot get out of their homes or even if they can, they are isolated and are unable to visit friends and family because they cannot get into their loved ones homes.

This legislation offers hope for many. Please pass this legislation.
Thank you.