



State of Connecticut
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
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VICE CHAIR
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Representative McGee, Senator Lopes, and distinguished members of the Housing committee:

I'm here today to testify in favor of House Bill 6529, An Act Concerning Housing Authorities and Establishing an Office of the Housing Advocate.

With many residents of my district facing housing difficulties, I have become very passionate about advocating for housing as a basic human right, especially for young families, disabled people, and elderly residents. Adequate housing, whether public or private, helps families and individuals establish mental, physical, and financial stability, as well as decreases anxiety rates and increases employment rates.

In recent months I have had several public housing residents in my district come forward to relay their negative experiences with employees in our local housing authority. These residents, who you will certainly hear more from later today, have experienced consistent mistreatment by the Executive Director of the Windsor Housing Authority. In addition to poor maintenance standards throughout two local housing authority buildings, these residents, many of whom are elderly, disabled, or both, have reported experiencing retaliatory backlash when coming forward to ask for basic resources. I have attached a summary of the complaints that were made during a community forum with Windsor Housing Authority residents, but I want to highlight two particularly heinous examples that were brought to us in an earlier petition.

The first is of an older woman who utilizes a scooter that was denied the construction of a ramp into her unit because she was not in a wheelchair. This denial came after she had received a note from a doctor saying that her scooter was to be used for the same purpose as a handicap wheelchair. The second is of a 97 year old blind woman who, despite by law having 30 days to move units, was given just four days to move into a new unit. On top of that her new unit did not have the necessary handicap bars, which then led to her falling and hitting her head.

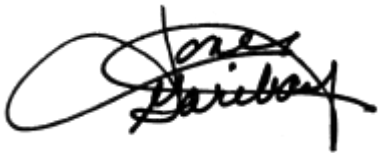
This bill, although not a cure all, provides the necessary oversight and training that will help not only the residents of the Windsor Housing Authority, but residents all over our state who might be experiencing these types of issues. By creating an Office of the Housing Advocate and requiring basic training for housing authority commissioners, we will be able to assist all parties involved in the public housing process.

Listening to the experiences of residents in my town has shown me that these issues can be mitigated or even prevented if everyone involved is more aware of their rights and responsibilities. As can be seen from the second example that I gave, negligence when it comes to administering the regulations associated with public housing can lead to dangerous situations for residents who are already incredibly vulnerable.

I believe that it is our duty as state legislators to do all that we can to help the most vulnerable in our communities. You cannot look at the stories that are attached to this testimony and tell me that the most vulnerable in my community are receiving the best service that they can receive. I am supporting this bill not only for my residents, but for every public housing resident in this state. This does happen elsewhere, but even if it didn't it is still our duty to provide all the commonsense protections that we possibly can.

I encourage you to support commonsense reform and pass this bill out of committee.

Thank you,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jane Garibay". The signature is stylized with a large, sweeping initial "J" and a long, horizontal flourish extending to the right.

State Representative Jane Garibay

Meeting with Residents of the Housing Authority Town of Windsor Nov 30th 2020

The following concerns were noted in the meeting:

Communication:

- Unable to reach staff in an emergency (Voicemail boxes are always full/phones not picked up)
- When resident is able to leave a message there is no response to concern
- Communication regarding COVID has not been timely and has been minimal
- Tone of communication with residents is describes as “harsh”, “antagonistic”, “yelling”, “aggressive”, “hostile” and “accusatory”
- Director and manager disparage others publicly (in meetings) and privately (to residents), including: previous Director, previous contractors, existing contractors, employees and residents
- No communication regarding staff changes, service provider changes, death of a resident during COVID, social opportunities
- Tenants openly discouraged from discussing housing issues together or attending HA Commission meetings

Safety:

- No working emergency response number available
- No grab bars in senior apartments and handicapped apartments
- Raised flooring in handicapped units creates a hazard for disabled residents
- Firing of previous maintenance, cleaning and lawn care contractors who provided satisfactory service and replaced with those who consistently fail to provide necessary assistance and basic services such a shoveled walkways and necessary repairs
- Failure to provide licensed and insured movers
- Failure to give adequate notice for moving
- Locked bathrooms in laundry area creating unsanitary conditions and health problems for handicapped and senior residents
- Emergency and general maintenance not addressed in a timely way
- Renovation project substandard and very delayed
- Residents fear “retaliation” and “intimidation” after speaking out including threats of eviction

Other Concerns:

- New tenants placed in renovated apartments before those already in residence or already contracted to get them
- Unequal treatment of disabled residents and senior residents in HA housing units (“rules apply to some and not others”)
- Renovated Apartments with safety issues not being addressed
- Commission is not meeting regularly, not accessible or advocating for the tenants
- Tenant Commissioner not advocating for tenants

