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ACLU OF RI POSITION: OPPOSE

TESTIMONY ON 26-S 2481, RELATING TO TRESPASS AND VANDALISM – RESIDENTIAL LANDLORD TENANT ACT May 12, 2026

The ACLU of Rhode Island wishes to register its opposition to this proposal which would make it a crime punishable by a year in prison for a person to “occupy a dwelling unit or other structure” without permission. This criminalization of “squatting” is cruel and seeks to address this state’s homelessness crisis with punishment rather than with a compassionate recognition of the plight that hundreds of unhoused Rhode Islanders face.

It is worth emphasizing that the bill is not limited to individuals who take refuge in a building or space that is open for tenancy, but would apply to any person taking shelter in an abandoned building or a facility not fit for habitation or rental to tenants due to its condition.

Some governments across the country are seeking to take advantage of the U.S. Supreme Court’s decision in the *Grants Pass* case two years ago to punish the homeless in myriad ways, but it would be unfortunate to see Rhode Island follow suit. Making it a crime for a homeless person to seek temporary shelter in an abandoned building and further engaging in the surreal attempt to fine them when, almost by definition, they have no money, is a harmful and completely ineffective response to a serious societal problem. So is sending a person to prison merely because they do not have a home.

Rhode Island’s serious homelessness crisis cannot be solved by punishing the victims of that crisis. The ACLU urges the committee to instead focus on more useful, empathetic and systemic solutions when addressing this critical issue.

Thank you for considering our views.