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ACLU OF RI POSITION: SUPPORT

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF 24-H 7959 and H-7963, RELATING TO PROPERTY – IMMIGRATION STATUS March 27, 2024

The ACLU of RI strongly supports this legislation, which would bar landlords from inquiring about a tenant or prospective tenant’s immigration or citizenship status, and further bars municipalities from requiring such inquiries. This legislation is especially appropriate in light of the General Assembly’s continued focus this year on addressing the serious housing issues facing the state.

The possibility of discrimination against legal immigrants, permanent residents, and even U.S. citizens is greatly increased when landlords have the opportunity to make inquiries like these, which should be none of their business. Such inquiries are essentially a proxy for discriminating against individuals based on their appearance, surname, ethnicity, race or similar inappropriate characteristics.

Unfortunately, we know from agencies that work with immigrant communities that this is a real problem that families encounter in Rhode Island. We also know that some landlords use knowledge of a tenant’s undocumented status to deter them from reporting housing violations. This type of exploitation is deeply troubling and cruel and, it should be worth noting, is also used against mixed families that consist of both documented and undocumented family members. Landlords simply should not be allowed to play the role of either immigration agents or “blackmailers” by seeking this information.

Shelter is a basic necessity of life. Denying people the right to obtain it – or discouraging them from even applying for it – on the basis of irrelevant and discriminatory inquiries should be banned. Other states – as diverse as California, Michigan, and North Carolina – have enacted laws protecting immigrants’ access to housing, and Rhode Island should do the same.

In sum, passage of this legislation should be part of any package of housing legislation that the General Assembly considers this session, for this type of discriminatory conduct is one of the elements that creates serious difficulties for a vulnerable class of tenants to find and keep housing.

Thank you for considering our views, and we hope you will act favorably on this bill.