



State of Rhode Island

GENERAL ASSEMBLY

Members of the Rhode Island General Assembly Urgently Call on Governor McKee to Issue an Executive Order Declaring a Public Health Emergency

Governor McKee,

The undersigned members of the Rhode Island General Assembly urgently call on you to declare a Public Health Emergency to address our homelessness crisis. Your leadership is needed now to protect and save the lives of Rhode Islanders across our state, including our working class neighbors, our children, and our veterans.

In the last few years, the General Assembly has given the Executive Branch considerable power and confidence to improve the state of housing and homelessness. In 2021, we approved the creation of a Department of Housing, with its Secretary reporting to you. In 2023, we allocated 32 additional Full Time Employees for FY24 to ensure there was capacity to conduct this desperately needed work. As a part-time legislature, we have always relied on the Executive Branch, our Governor, to execute the plans we collaboratively create while in session. With that expectation unmet, and winter fully underway, the problem remains urgent and we implore your administration to use the power vested in your office to help resolve it immediately.

There has been significant turnover in the Department of Housing leadership with over three different leaders in just as many years as the department has existed; service providers and community organizations are reporting excessive delays in funding, resulting in months of nonpayment for services in excess of \$1M dollars, while more than 80 service providers are operating without contracts dating back to October 2024. This is the second time in less than a year that these same service providers and community organizations needed to alert the Department of Housing to issues related to nonpayment. These administrative backlogs have severely impacted the response to one of the most pressing and urgent issues impacting all Rhode Islanders: housing. When the General Assembly granted millions of dollars to the Executive Branch to oversee this crisis, it was with full confidence that staffing and resources would be allocated with direction and oversight from your office.

We know, as New Englanders, that winter will come and bring its harsh weather. However, there was no plan this year for sheltering our most vulnerable populations. Moreover, the inability of your office to have a published protocol for predictable events, such as extreme cold, highlights a lack of foresight that is not only concerning but negligent. Your lack of leadership has exacerbated this crisis and your urgent correction and leadership is demanded.

In the past year, 54 Rhode Islanders have died because they resided outside in the elements. More have lost their lives because of diseases or illnesses they got as a result

of their being homeless. It is our duty as Rhode Islander lawmakers to ensure every single Rhode Islander, no matter if they have a physical permanent address or they are our neighbors residing outside, have elected officials at every level of government willing to prioritize legislation and actions to protect them.

Rhode Island, like many other states across the nation, is facing both a housing crisis and a homelessness crisis. Rates of homelessness in our state have increased by 34.9% in the last year and our coordinated entry system is at capacity with 103,911 calls from individuals seeking assistance in 2024. There are 674 people currently waiting for permanent shelter in Rhode Island.

This crisis has hit hard working families and dedicated public servants. **The largest population of people in our state experiencing homelessness is the working poor.** In December 2024, Rhode Island was the second highest, at 48%, of all states with individuals experiencing chronic patterns of homelessness according to the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development's (HUD) Annual Homelessness Assessment Report (AHAR) to Congress. Even more significantly, Rhode Island ranked third in the nation for the largest change in veterans experiencing homelessness per capita according to the same report.

We, the undersigned legislators, seek urgent action from your office and that you declare, by executive order, a Public Health Emergency to address our homelessness crisis.

By declaring a state of emergency, you can bypass the rules and regulations that prevent swift action, like opening up additional overnight shelters and dispersing funds to community organizations that serve our homeless neighbors all year long. The dedicated service providers and community organizations doing the work need to be reimbursed and additional funding allocated to continue filling the gaps left by our patchwork system of support.

Governor McKee, this is an urgent and dire situation. You must act swiftly and guarantee a solutions driven approach to this crisis by operating a fully functioning Department of Housing. We need a policy plan to address the housing crisis that impacts the lives of those who entrusted you to the office.

Signed,

Senator Tiara Mack
Senator Meghan Kallman
Senator Jonathan Acosta
Senator Linda Ujifusa
Senator Ryan Pearson
Senator Pamela Lauria
Senator Ana Quezada

Representative Teresa Tanzi
Representative Rebecca Kislak
Representative David Morales
Representative Enrique Sanchez
Representative Brandon Potter
Representative Lauren Carson
Representative Jennifer Stewart

Senator Bridget Valverde
Senator Alana DiMario
Senator Dawn Euer
Senator Melissa Murray
Senator Victoria Gu

Representative Edith H. Ajello
Representative Terri Cortvriend
Representative Susan Donovan
Representative Cherie Cruz
Representative Josh Giraldo
Representative Kathleen Fogarty
Representative Megan Cotter
Representative David Bennett
Representative Julie Casimiro
Representative Matthew Dawson
Representative Mary Ann Shallcross Smith
Representative Katherine Kazarian
Representative Grace Diaz
Representative Jenni A. Furtado
Representative Deborah Fellela
Representative Patricia Serpa
Representative Jason Knight
Representative June Speakman
Representative Karen Alzate
Representative John Lombardi
Representative Mia Ackerman
Representative Carol Hagan McEntee
Representative Michael Chippendale
Representative Sherry Roberts
Representative Jennifer Boylan