

Navigating the Housing Crisis in Rhode Island:

Information Challenges Facing Rhode Islanders

JUNE 2024

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Introduction

The housing crisis in Rhode Island has emerged as a critical issue, reflecting a complex interplay of economic, social, and policy factors that have converged to create a shortage of affordable and safe housing. This crisis is characterized by a growing demand for housing amidst a backdrop of inadequate supply, limited new construction, and escalating home values.

Here are some key numbers that illustrate the scope of the challenge and who is most affected:

- **25%** Increase in median rent in Rhode Island in just five years, from 2017 to 2022, from \$957 to \$1,195 (Rhode Island Department of Housing, 2022).
- **\$1,996** The cost of an average two-bedroom apartment in the state, requiring **an annual income of nearly \$80,000** to afford rent—double the state’s median renter income of \$40,000 (Sherman, 2023).
- **1** The number of towns in RI where a median-income household can afford to rent an average-priced two-bedroom apartment. Burville is currently the only town where a median income supports an average two-bedroom. (HousingWorksRI, 2023).
- **25,349** The number of evictions filed in Rhode Island since March 15, 2020 (Eviction Lab, 2024). Eviction filings declined significantly during the COVID-19 pandemic due to eviction moratoriums. Since those eviction bans have been lifted, nonpayment evictions have more than doubled to near pre-pandemic levels, totaling 4,466 in 2023 (Leslie and Sherman, 2024). **Households with children are much more likely to be evicted or to face eviction** than households that don’t have children.
- **72%** The increase in the number of people experiencing homelessness between 2019 and 2023 in Rhode Island.
- **Over 25,000** The number of renter households in Rhode Island who spend more than half of their income on housing. That is nearly **every sixth renter household** in the state. Low income renters are hardest hit, as 56% of the 49,468 renter households in the state who are extremely low income are “severely cost burdened”, which means they spend more than half of their income on housing. Rent cost burdens are relatively consistent across the state’s racial and ethnic groups (Housingworks RI, 2023).

Consequences of the Housing Crisis

The repercussions of high housing costs extend far beyond the realm of shelter, impacting physical and mental health, economic mobility, and educational opportunities for individuals and families alike.

Housing instability can have severe, multifaceted consequences for individuals and families including overcrowding, frequent moves, and living far away from work, school and support networks. When individuals and families are forced to spend a large portion of their income on housing, it leaves little money for other critical necessities leading to food insecurity, difficulty paying bills, and skipping necessary medical care. Lower income households facing high housing costs spend less money on food, transportation, and healthcare than similar unburdened households. Nationally, the median renter with an income under \$30,000 had just \$380



per month after paying for housing to cover other necessities in 2021—the lowest residual incomes in two decades (Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University, 2023). This increased stress and financial pressure can adversely affect mental and physical health.

Moreover, when faced with limited affordable housing options, people may be forced to live in low-quality housing, increasing the risk of negative health impacts including exposure to lead, mold and inadequate heating and cooling. Living in poor quality housing is linked to higher rates of stress, anxiety, depression and emotional/behavioral problems (Bonnefoy, 2007).

This is a particular problem for Rhode Island which has some of the oldest housing stock in the country. Older homes are more likely to contain lead based paint (EPA, 2024), have poorer air quality, pests and inadequate cooling and heating (Office of the Surgeon General, 2009).

Unable to afford housing, individuals and families face eviction and homelessness which are associated with a myriad of adverse physical and mental health outcomes in adults and children including mental illness, substance use, infectious and chronic disease and infant mortality. For a comprehensive review of the physical and mental health impacts of eviction see Smith, et., al. (2004) and homelessness see Richard and Kuhn (2023).

The Information Project (TIP)

In 2023 the Information Futures Lab at Brown University launched The Information Project to pioneer a new approach to understanding and addressing peoples' information needs while training the next generation of leaders in researching and managing information challenges. TIP fosters collaboration among students, researchers, community organizations, public officials, journalists and other stakeholders in local information ecosystems.

As part of TIP Rhode Island, Brown undergraduate and graduate students learn how to identify, research and respond to the information needs of Rhode Island residents. Students are trained in innovative research methodologies, such as digital ethnography, to uncover what information challenges surround key issues in the State. They learn to identify misleading narratives circulating among communities and find trends and patterns in the questions posed by residents in online spaces. They assess the information and content provided by local government agencies, newsrooms and community organizations on the topics of concern for residents and identify information gaps. Students then work together to develop potential responses and solutions after gaining instruction from a variety of fields including communications and media, behavioral sciences and public health.



Methodologies

For this investigation, we employed a digital ethnographic approach to investigate the experiences and behaviors of individuals within online communities related to the housing crisis in Rhode Island.

This approach allowed us to observe and analyze the conversations, communications, and interactions taking place across the digital platforms where Rhode Islanders are asking questions and voicing their concerns. Our investigation looked at Facebook, Reddit, X, and Nextdoor. By collecting a diverse array of data, including posts, comments and content shared by residents, we were able to gain rich insights into how Rhode Islanders are navigating and responding to the housing challenges they face. This enabled us to develop a nuanced understanding of the lived experiences, coping strategies, and collective efforts of those impacted by the housing crisis, as expressed and documented within these online spaces.

In addition, we conducted an examination of the resources and materials produced and shared by the state and local agencies and community organizations addressing the housing crisis. This examination provides insights into the accessibility, readability and usability of the information that is central to enrolling in and receiving housing support.

Findings

RHODE ISLAND'S HOUSING MARKET IS CREATING NEW INFORMATION NEEDS AND CHALLENGES

Characteristics of today's housing crisis—for example, the leverage provided to landlords by low vacancy rates—generates new information challenges and needs for Rhode Islanders struggling with housing insecurity. For those who are currently navigating the housing crisis, out of date and irrelevant information resources fail to provide guidance and may hinder progress.

→ **Avoiding Bad Landlords**

Landlords play an important role in the daily life of renters as they hold the power to evict or terminate a tenancy, set rental prices and determine the quality of housing conditions.

The laws regulating the private rental market strive to redress this power imbalance by requiring buildings to be maintained to a standard quality and establishing tenant rights. However, these laws largely rely on tenants to take action to hold landlords liable for problematic or harmful practices such as neglecting needed repairs or violating tenant rights.



However, tenants often find themselves in a precarious position when it comes to holding landlords accountable. Fear of retribution, such as eviction or non-renewal of leases, coupled with current difficulty in securing alternative affordable housing, discourages many from asserting their rights. Research from Brown University's Department of Urban Studies found some potential evidence for retaliatory evictions—Between 2016 and 2018 there were 252 evictions filed for properties that also had code violations and in 50% of these cases, the eviction was filed within 5 days of the violation (Drew, et. al. 2020). This exact challenge was the topic of a recent post on the subreddit r/Providence:



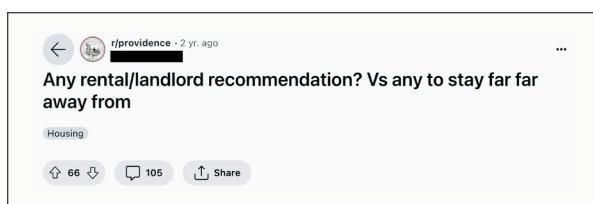
It is a “landlord’s market” in Rhode Island with large pools of rental applicants competing for limited supply of available homes, making it easy to replace protesting tenants.

Consequently, the fear of losing one’s home can act as a significant deterrent against reporting or demanding rectification of substandard living conditions or exploitative landlords, perpetuating a cycle of poor housing quality and tenant vulnerability (Schmidt, 2024).





In response, Rhode Islanders in search of housing are proactively looking for information on “bad” landlords and rental agencies to avoid. Our investigation online found residents asking about landlords with histories of unlawful practices, code violations and violation of tenants rights and others sharing their personal experiences with specific landlords.



In an unaffordable and competitive rental market, tenants are working to avoid moving because of unlawful, neglectful or retaliatory landlords. This is likely particularly important for renters with limited incomes or those who face discrimination in housing searches (Schmidt, 2024). By avoiding bad landlords from the outset, they reduce the risk of conflict or worse, having to move.

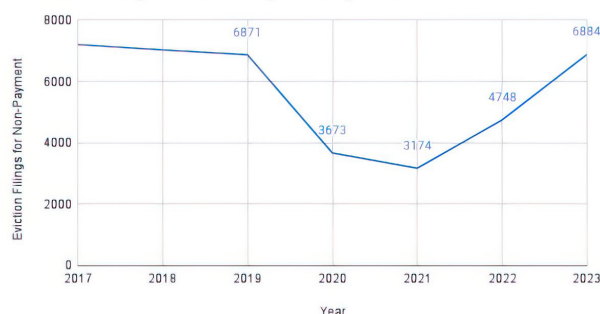
Their concern is supported for example by the recent lawsuits brought by the Rhode Island Attorney General against landlords in Pawtucket, Providence and Woonsocket including Pioneer Investments LLC, which owns and operates more than 175 residential rental units across Rhode Island. The lawsuit alleges that Pioneer ignored lead hazard laws, landlord-tenant laws, housing code regulations, and engaged in unfair and deceptive trade practices throughout the state including unlawfully charging and overcharging late fees on tenants. Analysis from the RI Department of Health found that 5 children living in Pioneer Investments Properties were poisoned by lead (Shea, 2023).



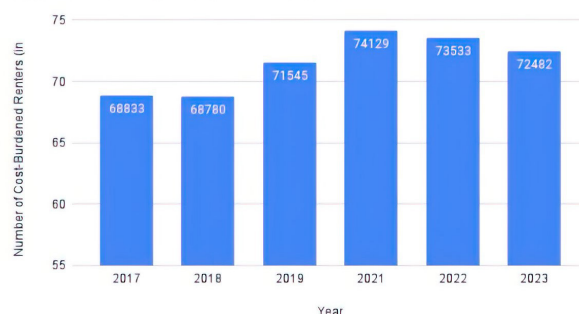
→ More People Are Seeking Information About Housing Support

As the housing crisis in Rhode Island continues, an increasing number of people are unable to afford rent—demonstrated by the number of eviction filings for non-payment and the number of cost burdened renters.

Eviction Filings for Non-Payment by Year



Number of Cost-Burdened Renters



(U.S. Census Bureau, 2022)

Predictably, housing cost burdens impact most lower income households. But the number of cost-burdened residents is rising rapidly among renters higher up on the income range. Between 2017 and 2022, the percentage of cost burdened renters making 51%-80% of their Area Median Income (AMI) increased by 10% (NLIHC, 2023). In the post below a Rhode Island user describes the “limbo” they are experiencing:

r/RhodeIsland • 7 mo. ago

How are people on the bottom supposed to afford housing?

Discussion

Since people on the bottom are not likely to get a home: rent is what, now over \$1500 for a 1 bedroom? On average? To reasonably pay for this, not even including utilities, you need \$4500 per month.

How is low income person, say under \$45k a year, supposed to afford that, nevermind bigger apartments? Roommates aren't even that easy to find in this state and in this world we live in now, would you want some stranger in the other room?

Utilities: electricity does NOT cost 10.3 cents per kWh. That's less than half the total cost with the bullshit fees included. It is so deceptive and unfair that National Grid (now RI Energy) lies like this to people. RI pays like 0.30c per kWh. Bullshit.

Low income housing? It's a joke. Even the nicer ones have such low income requirements that if you make over \$16 an hour and work full time, you'll exceed their income max.

Electric is now going up! More! Now think on this: all apartment complexes charge as much as they can. Some are now \$2000 for a 1 bedroom!

You literally can't afford housing (low income) if you're over \$16/hour and until you make like over \$25 an hour, maybe you can afford market rent at 40% of your annual income. The only way to get into low income is to make minimum wage full-time at a shit job, and anything better you get priced out.

There is no way out. My family is stuck in limbo where we are priced out of low income tax credit housing, but can't pay market rates or meet the income test.

160

 257
 Share

With more people struggling to pay for housing, there is a greater demand for housing support resources and consequently, an increasing number of Rhode Islanders are searching for information and support on what housing resources are available and which they are eligible for.

In 2023, 52% of all calls to 211 (Rhode Island's social service referral and information hotline) were about housing—returning to pre-pandemic rates following a significant decrease caused by eviction moratoriums (HousingWorksRI, 2023)

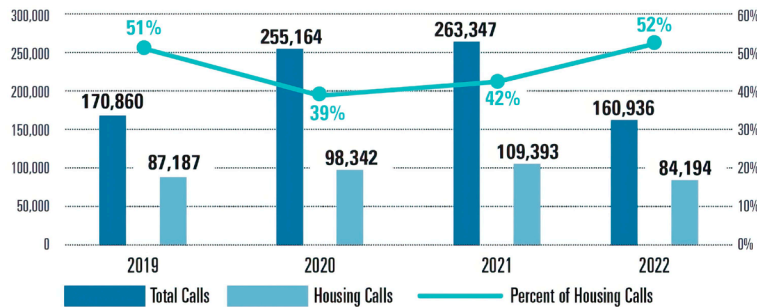
I appreciate your post and have so many mixed feelings. The system definitely needs improvement. I'm a working dad that is just barely above income requirements to qualify for social services, one child and domestic partner that doesn't work. I almost wish I earned 5k less to qualify for EBT and other stuff. It sucks, I love RI but struggle to consider myself even lower middle class. My rent in N Prov is \$1800 for a 2 bedroom. Half my monthly take home pay.

5 Reply Share ...



An evaluation of Rhode Island's Coordinated Entry System (CES)—the state's service which connects individuals and families experiencing homelessness or who anticipate becoming homeless with housing options, support and benefits—found that in 2022 their Help Center hotline received more than twice the amount of calls compared to a year earlier: an average of 6,150 calls per month, up from 2,500 in 2021 (Sparling, 2024)

Number of Housing Calls to United Way RI's 211



(Housingworks RI, 2023)

Our online investigation revealed that many residents are looking for information about what services are available and what they may qualify for.

  **r/providence** · 8 mo. ago

On the verge of becoming homeless. Any advice appreciated.

Housing

Throwaway account for obvious reasons.

Due to finances, it seems more likely than not I'll be facing eviction over the next week or two. Despite attempts to avert this, it seems I've run out of options. I did come across the RI Coordinated Entry system website, which I'm planning to contact today or tomorrow. Any advice, resources, or first hand experience would be much appreciated. Thank you.

Rent and low income

Question / Suggestion

Hey All,

What resources are available for low income single Rhode Islanders for rent assistance and help to find a place?

My mom has stayed with me during Covid, after her divorce. She makes about 40k/y (that's with a shit ton of overtime). 55years old. Great credit, one eviction on a background check (my dads fault - he literally took her money and didn't pay the rent). We tired to find her a condo to buy - figured she could get a roommate. But that has been a nightmare. Always out bid.

Anyways - I don't really know what's available for her to apply to. I have a newborn and every time I want to "make time to research" a million things become a priority. I'm not kicking her out or anything but I think she's ready to have her own space again.

Anything helps.



CRITICAL INFORMATION IS AVAILABLE BUT INACCESSIBLE

The process of securing safe and affordable housing is beset with obstacles that make critical information incomprehensible and inaccessible. **While information technically does exist, multiple factors make it difficult to access, understand and act on.**

A related investigation by Smith and Byrne (2023) investigated the policies and criteria used to deny or grant requests for subsidized housing in Rhode Island such as ongoing drug use. Notably, the majority of housing developments refused or ignored their requests for their admissions policies illuminating significant “implications for the accessibility and transparency of these plans for potential renters...” (p. 986). The plans they were able to analyze were found to lack clarity and transparency. For instance, 51% of the plans did not specify how many past years of a tenant’s criminal legal history is assessed. Moreover, 31% of the plans noted the use of tenant screening tools but did not list the factors that these tools use to score tenants. The authors note how the lack of clarity and transparency likely leave people without sufficient information to guide their housing search nor are the policies and algorithms able to be scrutinized by tenants or advocates.

Here are some examples of inaccessible information we have found in our assessments:

→ Complex and Technical Language

Whether it be an apartment lease or an application to a housing voucher program, the language and writing in housing information is often riddled with jargon, complex legalese, convoluted sentence structures, and intricate terminology (Bernal, 2019). This information can be largely incomprehensible to most people, potentially leaving them with a clear grasp on what they are agreeing to, their legal rights or what support they are eligible for.

A lease is a critical and foundational document. It spells out the rights and responsibilities of both the landlord and tenant. The typical lease—like most contracts—is dense, lengthy, loaded with legal jargon and virtually impossible for anyone without a law degree to understand fully.

← r/RhodeIsland · 2 mo. ago ...

need some help with ri tenancy

Question / Suggestion

my girlfriend and i had an apartment together with a 1 year lease. she broke up with me before our lease ended 3 weeks ago and already had another apartment lined up and moved out the next day.

i was never reached out to my management company for a lease renewal and i emailed them a couple days ago to let them know i was moving out.

they said if no parties give a 30 day notice then ri law states we have to do a month to month lease after so it's fair to both sides. i don't understand this really cause i thought after the lease ends and they don't offer a 30 day notice to renew or not renew then it's not on me?

clarification would be great here

Management 2:42 PM
To You ...

Below is the guideline of RI Tenancy. It has to be fair to both sides. We would have to give you thirty days notice to move out. If no notices are given by both sides, after a year lease, the rental agreement moves to month to month.

G. Termination of Tenancy
The landlord or the tenant may end a week-to-week oral or written rental agreement (tenancy) by sending a written notice (like the copy of section 56c in the appendix) by first class (regular) mail to the other party. It must be postmarked more than ten days before the specified termination date. A month to month tenancy or any periodic (specified time) tenancy of more than a month but less than a year may be terminated by the same type of notice (section 56c) mailed first class, and postmarked more than 30 days before the given termination date. A year-to-year tenancy can be terminated by the aforementioned notice, mailed first class, and postmarked more than three months before the end of the year's term.



We observe this playing out online with the numerous posts from Rhode Islanders looking for help in clarifying and understanding the terms of their leases. Online we found questions regarding basic but essential facets of a residential agreement—information which is more than likely included in their lease but the language used is too complex to understand it clearly.

Prior research has shown how the low readability, complex writing style and legal jargon of contracts, including leases, disenfranchise individuals including prospective tenants. Unable to understand the document's text, people misunderstand what they are agreeing to. More broadly, the public largely perceives contracts to be legally binding and non-negotiable (regardless if they actually are) and therefore, not worth fighting or questioning (Sommers, 2021).

In a tight housing market with few options, new tenants are likely in a “take it or leave it” situation and sign leases that they don’t fully understand. The low readability of leases likely discourages negotiation and may mislead tenants into agreeing to one-sided terms that favor the landlord. A nascent body of research examining residential leases in U.S. cities has found that leases are very likely to contain unenforceable provisions (which are valid but will not be enforced by the court because of its too unfair or was misrepresented) and oppressive terms (those which tilt power towards landlords), a trend that has sharply increased over the last two decades (Furth-Matzkin, 2017) (Hoffman & Strezhnev 2021).

Without a full and clear understanding of the terms, the risk of tenants unwittingly violating the lease—potentially prompting eviction—increases. Moreover landlords may act unlawfully but tenants put up with it, unaware of what is allowable.

We found that many of the documents intended to provide clarity to residents mimicked the complexity and low readability of leases. For example, “The Rhode Island Landlord-Tenant Handbook” produced by the state’s Office of Housing and Community Development requires an 11th grade reading level (based on the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level Test). However, a survey by the National Center for Education Statistics in 2017 found that 20% of adults in Rhode Island have approximately a second grade reading level (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). Despite its intention to support renters with more information, it remains unusable to many.



→ Complicated and Unnavigable Public Assistance Information

Learning about and applying for safety net programs, including subsidized housing, is notoriously difficult and previous research has shown how “administrative burden”—or the costs that come with learning about, applying for and using public services and benefits—can prevent people from enrolling and accessing support. Limited awareness of programs, misunderstanding eligibility criteria and the application process and confusion about how to use benefits can hinder program uptake and use among those who are eligible for benefits (Barnes and Riel, 2022). For example, confusion about Medicaid eligibility and the application process deters people from applying (Stuber et. al, 2000).

Our online investigation revealed how these challenges are impacting Rhode Islanders who are seeking out rental assistance. Given the number of residents who seemingly struggle to access critically important information, we evaluated the current information landscape for housing programs in the State. We found that the process of learning about available support programs and eligibility requirements was riddled with challenges.

For instance,. a Google Search for “RI housing rental assistance” returns results that are largely RIHousing webpages. RIHousing is the primary resource for information housing support including for those interested in the Housing Choice Voucher Program or Section 8.

However, housing choice vouchers are administered locally by public housing agencies (PHAs)—of which there are 26 in Rhode Island. RIHousing serves as the PHA for 19 of the 26 and, critically, is not the authority for the state’s most populous areas nor those with the greatest number of low-income residents. This critical distinction is not obvious on the RIHousing website and does not provide any instructions or website links to those who would be looking in areas outside of RIHousing’s 19 jurisdictions.

Moreover, the eligibility requirements outlined on RIHousing are difficult to understand. For example, the image below shows a portion of the HUD income limits document that is linked as the answer to the question “Do I qualify?”. The page does not spell out AMI (Area Median Income), clarify what number the percentages listed in the far left column are calculated using or define what “person” means (Just family members? What about domestic partners? etc). Without additional online searching, our own team could not easily interpret the table into eligibility criteria.

FY2024 Rhode Island Income Limits for Low- and Moderate-Income Households
(Incomes over 80% AMI are calculated based on HUD 2008 income limits policy)

Providence--Fall River, RI-MA HMFA 2024 MUNICIPALITIES: Barrington, Bristol, Burrillville, Central Falls, Charlestown, Coventry, Cranston, Cumberland, East Greenwich, East Providence, Exeter, Foster, Gloucester, Jamestown, Johnston, Lincoln, Little Compton, Narragansett, North Kingstown, North Providence, North Smithfield, Pawtucket, Providence, Richmond, Scituate, Smithfield, South Kingstown, Tiverton, Warren, Warwick, West Greenwich, West Warwick, Woonsocket								
	1 person	2 person	3 person	4 person	5 person	6 person	7 person	8 person
30%	\$23,600	\$27,000	\$30,350	\$33,700	\$36,580	\$41,960	\$47,340	\$52,720
50%	\$39,350	\$45,000	\$50,600	\$56,200	\$60,700	\$65,200	\$69,700	\$74,200
60%	\$47,220	\$54,000	\$60,720	\$67,440	\$72,840	\$78,240	\$83,640	\$89,040
80%	\$62,950	\$71,950	\$80,950	\$89,900	\$97,100	\$104,300	\$111,500	\$118,700
100%	\$78,680	\$89,920	\$101,160	\$112,400	\$121,400	\$130,400	\$139,400	\$148,350
115%	\$90,510	\$103,500	\$116,380	\$129,260	\$139,610	\$149,960	\$160,310	\$170,660
120%	\$94,440	\$108,000	\$121,440	\$134,880	\$145,680	\$156,480	\$167,280	\$178,080



In addition to confusing guidelines, potential beneficiaries are not provided information into the actual likelihood of receiving support. Because demand for low income housing greatly exceeds supply, very few actually are able to secure affordable housing. Nationally only 1 in 4 of eligible households receive assistance (NLIHC, 2022) and waitlists for housing are often years long. The Providence Housing Authority website indicates that the current wait time for a two-bedroom home is 5 to 7 years (Providence Housing Authority, n.d.)

While the Providence Housing Authority website does list wait times this information is not shared for the centralized waitlist. Those looking for help may invest time and resources to research and apply, only to understand later that it would take years to actually receive housing.

During the past year I have called, checked, called again, looked into every program I found out about, but I find myself still homeless. Recently we left our friends home after a year (this was a mutual decision) and still we haven't been able to secure housing despite being on several lists for Section 8, Low-Income Housing and various shelter lists through Crossroads RI. As of now we are staying in a hotel but I can't afford to do that long term. Any help that is given will be used to stay at a hotel while I keep trying to secure a home for the children & I..

I am on many wait lists for low income housing and section 8 which could take years and the apartments I apply for on websites are asking 3x proof of income and denying me after I pay for app fee when I only have 2x income plus snap benefits, 687 credit, and savings. I am also willing to offer an extra months rent. I have called 2-1-1, Im being told that Im doing every thing I can. Ive contacted representatives also who are trying to help. I am not finding any apartments for single mothers, instead apartments more steered towards students/adults renting out each room price wise. If you are landlord willing to accept single mother please send me message. Thank you for your time and consideration.

The challenges to navigating the subsidized housing system often continue even after receiving benefits particularly for the Housing Choice Voucher Program. Discrimination based on the source of income—in which a landlord unlawfully rejects a housing application from an individual relying on a voucher—is a long standing issue across the country and in Rhode Island.

A study by SouthCoast Fair Housing (SCFH) in 2019 revealed a number of challenges:

- Housing choice voucher (HCV) participants simply cannot afford most of the units advertised online. Of approximately 3,070 listings, only 34% were priced within the range in which a voucher could be applied.
- Notably, an additional 15% of affordable listings included a minimum gross income requirement for prospective tenants, usually 2.5 or 3-times the monthly rent. While not explicitly discriminatory, minimum income thresholds effectively function as a ban on low-income tenants, even those with a voucher that covers the rent in full.
- After calling the landlords or real estate agents advertising apartments online, 63% would not consider a tenant with a voucher, though it covered the rent in full.



Despite income-based discrimination being made illegal in Rhode Island in 2021, the practice still seems to continue. We found numerous instances across all platforms of Rhode Island housing-voucher-holders posting about the immense difficulty they have had finding a landlord willing to rent to voucher holders and looking for information about where they might find a willing landlord.

Unfortunately, there are not any clear directions from state housing agencies on where or how to find landlords or property management agencies that will accept vouchers.

Section 8 vouchers are one of the few ways that low income households can afford rent in the neighborhoods where they want to reside but the difficulties presented to tenants with vouchers ultimately undermines this objective.

I am reaching out to anyone with information . I have been selected for a section 8 housing voucher in August. I have been looking every day for an apartment for me and my child, I view apartments but once they ask for my income and I tell them I have a section 8 voucher everyone tells me they can't take it, a lot of realtor's want 3x times the rent or make at-least 3x times the income. I am a single young mother and homeless with my 3 year old daughter living in the extended stay in Providence, I have been here for almost 2 months. I had to call DCYF on myself to find somewhere safe and warm to sleep, there's no room in shelters or they have very long waiting list. My voucher expires December 17, 2023 but they put an extension on it so in case I didn't find anything. After the extension is up they will take my voucher away from me and put my name back on the list but at the bottom. I have become very depressed and I quit my job from being so depressed, I have no help and I just don't know what to do anymore. 😞



Like

69 Comments

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In search of apartment that will accept section 8

Question / Suggestion

Hi there, I just recently got approved for a section 8 voucher that I can take anywhere.

Looking for a 2 bedroom , max rent 1650. (Preferably not in Pawtucket, central falls or Woonsocket.) I am employed, have no prior evictions, clean background, no pets, and do not smoke. Unfortunately I have poor credit due to falling behind on credit card payments, many decent places are asking 650+ score. I am willing to get renters insurance if needed.

I am on just about every low income housing waiting list there is, I just really need a safe place to live in for me and my two young kids.



Downtown Pawtucket • 12 Dec • 🌐



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Like

69 Comments

Share

Filtered comments



North Main • 27w



🙏🙏🙏 So sorry to hear what a struggle you are having. I hope something comes up for you..

There was a number on here for a realtor that was able to help with Section 8 housing.. if I can find that I will forward it to you

Like

Reply

Share





→ Language and Technology Barriers

For those whom English is their second language, those without a computer or internet access and for people who may struggle to use technology, the current housing assistance information infrastructure is largely inaccessible.

Our evaluation revealed that housing information is largely restricted to English with some translation to Spanish, leaving behind speakers of other languages in the State. For example, the RI Landlord-Tenant Handbook is only available in English.

Users are forced to rely on translation functions provided by their internet browser, such as Google Translate. Previous research has shown that Google Translate can be flawed with incorrect translations, data misinterpretations, and an inability to translate culturally bound concepts (Terantino, 2024).

In addition to language restrictions, we found housing information is shared predominantly online and in some instances, applications for assistance programs only allow applications to be submitted online.

While this is how most people would access information and apply, the digital requirements mean many Rhode Islanders could be left behind. A survey of more than 25,000 people in California found that lack of internet access was the greatest barrier to applying for emergency rental assistance provided during the COVID-19 pandemic (Aiken et. al., 2023).

According to Census data, 5.4% of Rhode Islanders don't own a computer and 8.6% don't have an internet subscription. This is concentrated largely among those most vulnerable to housing insecurity. Hispanic or Latino residents are most likely to not own a computer and in households with income less than \$20,000 in the last year, 29% don't have internet compared to just 3.3% of households whose income is \$75,000 or more (US Census Bureau, 2022).

RHODE ISLANDERS ARE WORKING HARD TO SUPPORT EACH OTHER

Despite the significant challenges Rhode Island residents face in the search for affordable housing, we also observed the immense support they provide for each other across online platforms. For the many questions or dilemmas that people posted online, there were just as many replies with information about how to connect with services, advice on potential resources and general messages of sympathy and solidarity.

We found that sites including Reddit and Nextdoor have emerged as platforms for mutual aid in response to the housing crisis in Rhode Island. Mutual aid, historically practiced by marginalized groups, involves communities cooperatively meeting basic needs through solidarity and care when governments fail to do so, especially during severe crises. Information is often a key offering of mutual aid efforts as residents support each other by sharing their own knowledge on what resources are available or “insider information” gleaned from first hand experiences with services. Rhode Islanders are leveraging mutual aid by exchanging and sharing information to support and care for their neighbors facing housing insecurity. More than just providing information, these practices help combat isolation and stigma and “by creating spaces where people come together based on some shared need or concern but encounter and work closely with people whose lives and experiences differ from their own, cultivate solidarity” (p. 7, Spade, 2020).



Solutions

It is important to recognize information needs and gaps surrounding the housing crisis in Rhode Island as a core component of the response to the crisis. Improvements in people's housing situation often start with access to reliable, accurate, accessible information from trusted sources, as this report lays out. Solutions need to

- **Address the barriers that make information inaccessible**, such as ensuring the use of clear, concise, and easy-to-understand language in public information and essential documents including leases or eviction notices. One obvious action is the enforcement of Rhode Island's 2019 Plain Language Government Communications Act (R.I. Gen. Laws § 42-64.16-1 et seq.), which requires state executive agencies to use plain language in public communications. For example, under the law, the Office of Housing and Community Development should be rewritten to be usable by residents of all reading levels.
- **Build on communications and community engagement best practices**, to understand people's main concerns and challenges, provide opportunities for agency and self-advocacy, and to bridge information gaps.

Key non-profit organizations across the state are hard at work applying best practices to fill gaps and meet the evolving housing information needs of Rhode Islanders. We hope this report and the associated student projects available at sites.brown.edu/tip will assist in those efforts.

Note that the student projects accompanying this report are not a comprehensive response to the many information needs the team discovered, but rather examples of how to creatively meet emerging housing information needs based on people's online questions. From a How to Read a Lease Flyer in Spanish to an effort to make convoluted information about rent support programs more accessible to a data investigation into the precursors of housing emergencies, the projects are meant to support community organizations currently shouldering the load.

If you have feedback, ideas or would like to collaborate with our Lab and student teams on how we can support your organization in bridging information gaps, we'd love to hear from you! You can email Daisy Winner, IFL Program Manager, at Daisy_Winner@brown.edu



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