

Testimony of R Feynman, Disability Policy Consortium
Before Joint Committee on the Judiciary
May 9, 2023

In Support of H.1690/S.956, An Act promoting housing opportunity and mobility through eviction sealing (HOMES); **H.1682/S.1048** An Act relative to summary process and rental assistance to make permanent and improve Chapter 257 protections and the 2-tier eviction process; **and H.1731**, An act promoting access to counsel and housing stability in Massachusetts

Chairs Eldridge and Day, and honorable members of the Joint Committee on the Judiciary: My name is R Feynman, and I'm a community organizer for the Disability Policy Consortium. I am here to testify today in support of three bills: H.1690/s956 aka the HOMES act, H1682/S1048 aka chapter 257, and H1731, aka access to counsel.

I'd like to tell you about my friend. I met her at a trans community-building group – at which she was a foundational presence, and one of the most regular attendees. She has disabilities and receives SSI. She loves video games, sailor moon, and trains. She struggled for a very long time to get access to a housing voucher, find a place to live, and move out of her controlling mother's house. She has lived in her own apartment for about 5 years now.

My friend has struggled to have enough money to live for the whole time I've known her. She is able to work part time, but many employers don't see past her disability. When she lost her most recent job, she fell behind on rent. Despite having a housing voucher, she has been served with a notice to quit and has an eviction hearing this Thursday.

As a person who does housing advocacy for people with disabilities, I've tried to help my friend throughout this process. She applied for RAFT but hasn't heard back. If H.1682/S.1048 were in place, she would have more time to figure this out and not have to go into this eviction hearing without that resource.

I recommended that she reach out to a lawyer – after all, it is a court hearing. She struggled to find a pro bono lawyer in time for her court date. I'm worried about her, because housing law

and regulations are confusing even before you bring in vouchers and public housing policy. She's not an expert at those things, and has struggled in the past to get people in positions of power to listen to her and understand what she's saying. If the HOMES were already in effect, and there was a program that granted her access to counsel, I would rest much easier. Knowing that someone who has had time to listen to her story and could communicate it in an effective way to the judge, was on the case.

Should the worst happen and she's evicted, neither she nor I know what's next for her. Her mother has passed away, and she has no other family to support her or move in with. It is so much harder to find a place to live when you have an eviction on her record, and she needs to stay within the communities where she has built her support networks.

People with disabilities are more than twice as likely to be homeless than their nondisabled counterparts. We are more likely to have no or low income, we are less likely to be employed, and we are more likely to experience housing instability. Affordable, accessible housing options are few and far between. At the same time, housing is tied to better health outcomes, stabler mental health, and improved quality of life.

This means that once we have a place to live, even if it's not perfect, we really want to stay. But disabilities can put you at more risk for eviction. If you lose your job due to discrimination, for example, or have your SSI/SSDI benefits cut unexpectedly, and you fall behind on rent. If you experience a manic episode or mental health crisis, and your neighbors report you as disruptive. If your brain fog, executive dysfunction, or developmental disability make it difficult for you to keep organized and you lose track of important paperwork.

For my friend, and for hundreds and thousands of disabled people like her, these bills will make a huge difference. Please approve these three bills swiftly and move them out of committee.

Thank you very much.