



RHODE ISLAND KIDS COUNT

ONE UNION STATION
PROVIDENCE, RHODE ISLAND 02903
401/351-9400 • 401/351-1758 (FAX)

**Testimony Re: House Bill 5946 Regarding Lead Hazard Mitigation
House Housing and Municipal Government Committee**

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Stephanie Geller, Deputy Director

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today. Rhode Island KIDS COUNT would like to voice its strong support for House Bill 5946 and thank Representative Voas for sponsoring this legislation and Representatives O'Brien, Morales, Casimiro, DeSimone, Solomon, and Kazarian for cosponsoring. Currently, the *Lead Safe Mitigation Act* requires that property owners of pre-1978 buildings (when interior lead paint was banned) ensure that rental units are lead safe before renting out a unit. However, there are exemptions to this requirement. Owners of buildings that were built before 1978 and that include two or three units, one of which is occupied by the property owner, are not required to ensure that their rental units are lead safe.

Our state includes many two- and three-unit buildings, particularly in urban areas, and many of these buildings were built before 1978 and are likely to contain lead hazards. For example, recent Census data from 2016-2020 show that 84% of Central Falls housing stock and 85% of Providence housing stock was built before 1980. In fact, **Rhode Island has the highest percentage of low-income children (81%) and the second highest percentage of children of all incomes (71%) living in older housing in the U.S., after New York.**

Lead exposure, even at very low levels can cause irreversible damage, including slowed growth and development, learning disabilities, behavioral problems, and neurological damage. Though rare, severe poisoning can result in seizures, comas, and even death. **In 2021, 602 Rhode Island children under age six who were screened had confirmed elevated blood lead levels, including 38 in Central Falls, 30 in Cranston, 25 in East Providence, 285 in Providence, and 32 in Woonsocket.**

Luckily, lead poisoning is preventable, but in order to prevent more children from being exposed, **we need to put laws in place to protect all children, no matter where they live.**

Thank you for the leadership that the General Assembly has shown in keeping our children safe and healthy and for the opportunity to provide this testimony.