



UNIVERSITY OF HAWAII SYSTEM

Legislative Testimony

Testimony Presented Before the
Senate Committee on Housing
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SB 2595 – RELATING TO HOUSING

Chair Espero, Vice Chair Harimoto, and members of the committee:

Mahalo for the opportunity to testify today in support of SB 2595. I am here representing the Center on Disability Studies (CDS), College of Education, University of Hawai'i at Mānoa.

Over the past year or so, my colleague Patricia Morrissey, Director of CDS, and I have been working with many others in the informal Hawai'i VISIBLE Housing Coalition to incorporate simple visitability standards into residential renovation and construction. At the county level, these efforts led to adoption of a visitable housing resolution by the Honolulu City Council, and work on similar resolutions is underway on the Big Island and Maui. SB 2595 and the companion, HB 1920, were developed over the past half year in collaboration with the Kupuna Caucus.

The proposed visitability standards allow wheelchair users to easily go in a home through a no-step entrance, navigate hallways, access a bathroom and bedroom, turn on the lights, plug in electronics, and benefit from a smoke detector that makes both sound and light warning signals.

We recognize that the State Legislature is a critical partner in promoting the use of visitability standards statewide. By offering tax credits for including visitability standards in home construction and renovation, as proposed in SB 2595, we will bring about more visitable spaces for wheelchair users.

I would like to bring to your attention two reports that may help inform your deliberations by providing in-depth background information on visitable housing.

One report was by the State Legislature's own Home for Life Task Force, submitted in January 2011 and entitled, *Interim report to the Twenty Sixth Legislature, State of Hawaii, pursuant to SCR 7, SD 1*. It is available at:

http://lrbhawaii.info/reports/legrpts/legis/2012/scr7_sd1_09.pdf

The purpose of the Task Force was "to reduce barriers to aging in place and to facilitate multigenerational or accessible living." In its report, the Task Force explained that it only had enough time to "scratch the surface" in its research, so its recommendations mainly concerned further research and discussion. SB 2595 may be viewed as responding to the following recommendation on tax credits in that report:

"Explore public policies for builders to incentivize the construction of aging in place, multigenerational, visitable, or accessible homes. Possible incentives may be tax credits for developers through density bonuses, increased lot size or other credits."

The other report summarizes a study by CDS to meet the State of Hawai'i's responsibility to regularly inform the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) about the "impediments to fair housing choice" it has identified and to provide a plan for reducing those impediments. CDS was engaged to conduct the study because the state and county jurisdictions with HUD funding decided to focus on impediments faced by people with disabilities, since "disability" has come to replace "race" and "religion" as the most common bases for complaints alleging housing discrimination. Our report was submitted in November 2016 and is entitled *Analysis of Impediments to Fair Housing Choice with a Focus on People with Disabilities*. It is available at:

<http://www.cds.hawaii.edu/sites/default/files/imce/downloads/projects/Fair-Housing-Project-Report.pdf>

The report explains that Hawai'i's people with mobility impairments tend to face a substantial impediment, namely the lack of housing that is both affordable and accessible for wheelchair users. A major report recommendation is therefore that all new housing in Hawaii meet at least the lowest level of accessibility according to international and U.S. building code standards, labeled Type C. Type C housing is also known as "visitable" because it enables people with mobility challenges to visit their friends and neighbors, thereby reducing their social isolation.

In our view, SB 2595 is transformational legislation. It is not just legislation that will benefit wheelchair users. It is not just legislation that will foster more social inclusion. It is legislation that will reinforce Hawaiian cultural traditions, by promoting multigenerational living and supporting seniors to age-in-place in natural environments that contribute to independence while avoiding placement in institutions. It is notable that over the lifetime of new homes, it is estimated that over two-thirds will be inhabited by at least one person

with mobility challenges. In addition, even those of us fortunate to be fully mobile are likely to appreciate living in a visitable home without steps to the entrance because, for example, we are trying to enter with a baby stroller or are temporarily on crutches due to an injury.

By increasing the stock of visitable homes, SB 2595 will generate economic benefits. Seniors and their families may enjoy substantial savings through reduced costs for home modifications plus being able to avoid or delay expensive institutional care. Tourism will also benefit because tourists in the specialty segment of wheelchair users will be better able to find accessible vacation rentals and bed-and-breakfasts and also visit local residents in their accessible homes.

Finally, SB 2595 if enacted will expire at the end of 2022. The Center on Disability Studies stands ready to work with the Legislature to study the impact of the tax credits in the legislation and to assess the value of extending them beyond 2022.