



To: House General, Housing and Military Affairs Committee
From: Karen Horn, Director Public Policy & Advocacy
Date: April 6, 2022
Re: S. 210, Rental Housing Safety

The Vermont League of Cities and Towns supported S. 79 last year and urged local officials to ask the Governor to sign it. We also support the effort to address the Governor's concerns in S. 210, which is before you now.

The core issue for local governments is moving primary responsibility for rental housing inspections from the local health officer to the Department of Public Safety except in those municipalities with a comprehensive inspection program in place.

Vermonters who rent housing either as tenants or landlords, need to be confident that the enforcement of standards is not only well-intentioned but also conducted by individuals with expertise in housing inspection, and who have on-going training and sufficient resources to assure compliance with rental housing health codes.

Enforcement of the Rental Housing Health Code is currently the responsibility of the health officer who the selectboard recommends and the Commissioner of Health appoints. In the event no local health officer is recommended, the chair of the selectboard is the designated health officer. Mostly volunteers, health officers have no particular expertise in the health, safety, sanitation and fitness for habitation standards designed to assure that Vermonters have access to adequate housing, or in the applicability of laws pertaining thereto. Those laws include sewage and septic systems, lead paint, animal control, drinking water safety, insect and rodent infestation, hazardous spills, asbestos, and air quality. The time and complexity of addressing rental housing complaints often far exceeds volunteer local health officers' capacity to ensure deficiencies are corrected.

As S. 210 is written, rental housing inspection at the Department of Public Safety would be complaint driven. This is in fact how most rental housing inspections happen at the local level today. S. 210 would provide that a local health officer could assist in an inspection or could conduct an inspection on their own provided they issue an inspection report in compliance with the standards established in the bill. It also provides for concurrent jurisdiction until the Commissioner of Public Safety has adopted rules governing rental housing health and safety.

We also support the establishment of the Vermont Rental Housing Investment Program to provide grants and forgivable loans to private landlords for rehabilitation of eligible rental housing units. We do note that there are a confusing array of programs right now to assist with



various aspects of housing and it would be helpful if there were some kind of navigation tool that could help local officials and individuals navigate that landscape.