

To: The House Committee on General & Housing
From: Alex Karambelas, Policy Advocate, ACLU of Vermont
Re: H. 169- *An act relating to amending the prohibitions against discrimination in public accommodations and housing*
Date: March 31st, 2025

The ACLU of Vermont strongly supports [H. 169- *An act relating to amending the prohibitions against discrimination in public accommodations and housing*](#), working to make Vermont a safe place to live for all members of our community. This bill will remove tremendous barriers to housing for immigrant families, all of whom contribute to the diversity and vibrancy of our state.



PO Box 277
Montpelier, VT 05601
(802) 223-6304
acluvt.org

James Duff Lyall
Executive Director

Falko Schilling
Advocacy Director

Housing in Vermont has reached a level of crisis, with over 36,000 households- one in four Vermonters- paying more than 50% of their income towards housing costs. Due to Vermont's extreme housing stock shortage, rental vacancy rates hover at some of the lowest levels in the country at just 3% statewide. In turn, highly competitive housing markets increase the risk of discrimination for many protected classes.

While these disparities affect all populations across Vermont, they disproportionately impact undocumented, mixed-status, and asylum-seeking families already facing severe barriers to housing. For many immigrants, work authorization and documentation of citizenship is exorbitantly difficult to obtain. For asylum-seeking families, documentation wait periods leave immigrants without needed authentication for long periods of time despite entering legally.

Collateral effects on job prospects and wages compound with issues such as discrimination and housing application documentation to worsen barriers. Fear of deportation for undocumented individuals and families prevents the reporting of poor housing- and work- conditions, and a lack of access to federal funds limit available support services- all contributing to materially unsafe conditions for immigrant families seeking a place to live. By utilizing state-level mechanisms to protect our neighbors, Vermont can improve equal access to housing for those who are currently vulnerable.

Bill Context

Social Security Number (SSN) Requirements:

Efforts to protect social security data are aligned with other recent policy efforts in Vermont and are particularly important given the potential rollback of data protections on a federal level. As the Trump administration works to dismantle the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau- the agency responsible for providing consumer relief within instances of fraud- state efforts to safeguard sensitive information are more critical than ever for all people, regardless of immigration status.

Alongside several other states, Vermont enacted the Social Security Number Protection Act in 2005, restricting and protecting the use and disclosure of social security numbers for business transactions (9 V.S.A. § 2440). Expanding the policy to include encrypted websites and mailings would strengthen consumer privacy and prior legislative intent, following the wake of 5 other states with similar laws. Under this bill, landlords would still be able to check credit scores and consumer reports without access to a SSN, as these platforms can identify consumers with only a name, former address, date of birth, and other identifying information such as previous employers. Other systems, such as

criminal record check databases, can be accessed with an individuals' name and date of birth and do not require a SSN. Removing SSN requirements for applicants can thus protect critical consumer information without infringing on current applicant proceedings for landlords.

Fair Housing Protections:

As part of the Civil Rights Act of 1968, the Federal Fair Housing Act made it illegal for housing providers to discriminate on the basis of certain protected classes including national origin, race, religion, and sex; additional categories of familial status (presence of children) and disability were subsequently added in 1988. While Vermont's Fair Housing Act mirrors federal law in many ways, it both adds additional categories (age, gender identity, sexual orientation, marital status, receipt of public assistance, and victims of abuse) and does not explicitly include the federally-recognized category of nation of origin, or the federally unrecognized category of citizenship/immigration status. This disparity creates a lack of statewide recourse for violations of immigrant housing rights, including discriminatory housing refusal in sales, rentals, and public accommodations and harassment of current occupants. Two states, New York and California, include state-level housing discrimination protections for citizenship and immigration status. Vermont can make a critical state-level commitment to the equal protection of all residents who are currently unprotected from housing discrimination by state and federal law.

Conclusion

Enhancing equal housing protections has never been more important. We currently face deeply concerning affronts to the lives of immigrants nationwide. Efforts to eliminate federal housing discrimination protections, the freezing of funds to resettlement agencies that assist with housing, and threats of mass deportations have created an environment of fear for many new Americans who have made Vermont their home. Vermont policy makers can and should use all available measures to protect the health, safety and wellness of immigrants living in our state while simultaneously strengthening consumer protections for all Vermonters.

Sincerely,

Alex Karambelas, Policy Advocate, ACLU of Vermont



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