Testimony of The Pew Charitable Trusts

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LD 2224: An Act to Reduce Certain Costs Associated with Residential Construction

Thank you, Chair Curry and members of the committee for the opportunity to testify. I'm Seva Rodnyansky from the Housing Policy Initiative at The Pew Charitable Trusts, a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization.

Pew has conducted extensive research on building codes, fire safety, and policies that best facilitate the development of new housing. Pew recently released a report looking at residential fire deaths by building type and age of building.[1] This included coding every residential fire death in Maine from 2020 through 2024 for which public data is available. Modern multi-family structures were the safest. Single-family houses make up 80% of Maine's housing stock but had 90% of fire deaths. Multifamily buildings of all ages make up 20% of the housing stock and had 10% of fire deaths. Modern, multi-family homes built since 2000 are 3% of Maine's housing stock but had 0% of fire deaths. (See Table 1 below)

Table 1: Maine Fire Fatalities (2020 – 2024) and current housing stock

	Single-family	**Old multifamily (built 1999 or earlier)**	**Modern multifamily (built 2000 or later)**
Share of Maine housing stock	**80%**	**17%**	**3%**
Share of fire deaths	**90%**	**10%**	**0%**

*Sources: Pew's analysis of USFA Media 2016 to 2024 and National Fire Incident Reporting System (NFIRS) 2016 to 2023 data.. These data are collected from publicly available datasets and are likely a slight undercount of the true number of fatal fire incidents.**

Adding New Housing is Key to Improve Fire Safety

In general, new housing is far safer than older housing, and building more new housing will improve fire safety. Studying how to reduce construction costs while ensuring housing is safe is essential to ensuring adequate new housing stock is added quickly.

For example, existing research shows that sprinklers are essential to protecting residents in larger multifamily housing, but the cost-benefit tradeoffs are less clear when looking at single family

[1] Clifford, L., Rodnyansky, S., and Horowitz, A. "Modern Multifamily Buildings Provide the Most Fire Protection," The Pew Charitable Trusts, 2025, https://www.pew.org/en/research-and-analysis/issue-briefs/2025/09/modern-multifamily-buildings-provide-the-most-fire-protection

homes. Studies in Massachusetts and New York found that the high cost of mandating sprinklers in single-family homes could reduce housing production because it would increase construction costs. Any slowdown in new housing construction means more people live in older, less-safe homes. When Pew coded every reported fire death in the U.S. in 2023, we found that newer single-family homes were much safer than older single-family homes, even though the very large majority of new single-family homes studied did not have sprinklers. The fire death rate in pre-1970 construction single-family homes is three times as high as the fire death rate in post-2010 single-family homes.

Another comparison looks at duplexes versus buildings of three or more units. Two-unit buildings (duplexes) in the United States are generally regulated under the International Residential Code (IRC), while buildings with three units or more are usually regulated under the International Building Code (IBC). Other than California, Maryland, and Washington, D.C., states that adopt the IRC do not require sprinklers for single-family homes, and duplexes usually do not have sprinklers. Some states, like Utah, also exempt 3-4 unit buildings from sprinkler mandates.[2]

Duplexes have seen significant improvements in fire deaths rates since 2000, just like 3 and 4 unit buildings, despite falling under very different building codes. Since 2000, fire death rates for 2-4 unit buildings are more than 80% lower than pre-2000 single-family homes or apartments. This broad improvement indicates that, within multifamily buildings, construction year is a more important factor in fire safety than building size. The median age of tenant-occupied housing in the U.S. is 43 years old because of housing underproduction; because most fire deaths occur in older housing, our research has found adding new housing of any kind improves overall fire safety.

Allowing 4-6 Story Single-Stair Mid-Rise Apartments Is Safe

It's also positive that Maine has taken the initial step to authorize single-stair buildings up to 4 floors—and our research shows that it's possible to safely allow up to 6 floors.

Single-stairway apartment buildings above three stories had not been allowed in most U.S. cities because of concerns about their fire safety and a dearth of up-to-date information on their safety track record. To fill this gap Pew released an extensive report on the costs, benefits, and safety of single-stairway buildings.[3]

We looked at New York City and Seattle, the two U.S. cities have allowed and built 4-6 story single-stairway buildings that have modern fire safety features within the past decades. Pew examined fire deaths in these cities and found that overall, fire death rates in single-story buildings were indistinguishable from those in other multifamily buildings.

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[2] Utah H.B. 175 Housing Construction Amendments, 2025, https://le.utah.gov/~2025/bills/static/HB0175.html

[3] Seva Rodnyansky et al., "Small Single-Stairway Apartment Buildings Have Strong Safety Record," The Pew Charitable Trusts, 2025, https://www.pew.org/en/research-and-analysis/reports/2025/02/small-single-stairway-apartment-buildings-have-strong-safety-record.

For example, in New York City, which has 4,440 modern single-stairway buildings, the overall rate of fire deaths since 2012 was the same as in other residential buildings.

Four fire deaths in total occurred in modern single-stair buildings in New York City and Seattle from 2012 to 2024, and we thoroughly investigated each. None were related to the lack of a second stairway– they all occurred in unit.

These buildings are safe because of their modern safety features. Newer single-stairway buildings in New York City and Seattle are required to have sprinklers just like virtually all new U.S. apartment buildings—both inside units and in the main public areas. Single-stairway buildings also have smoke alarms, self-closing doors, and fire-rated walls- like other modern multifamily housing. Together, these features make mid-rise single-stairway buildings up to six stories as safe as other modern apartment buildings and much safer than the existing stock of single-family homes.

Single-stair buildings up to 8 stories also had shorter evacuation times than the typical large two-stairway apartment buildings allowed by code today, according to fire engineering research released late last year as part of the State of Minnesota's single-stair study.[4] Single-stair mid-rise buildings have a lower number of occupants per building and per stair and shorter travel distances to exit. As a result, small-floorplate single-stair buildings have lower risk of occupants not being able to evacuate than large two-stair buildings.[5]

Maine is not alone in exploring ways to reduce costs in the building code without compromising safety. Over the past two years, multiple states have enacted laws or updated codes to allow single-stairway mid-rise apartment buildings including Colorado, New Hampshire, Montana, and Texas.[6] Multiple cities have also updated codes to allow single-stairway apartment buildings above four stories, including Baltimore, Denver, Austin, Memphis, and Nashville.[7] Tennessee, North Carolina, Utah, and Rhode Island have passed legislation that moves 3-4 unit buildings from the commercial code to the residential code, making this type of safe, modern multifamily housing less costly to build.

Thank you for your continued attention to these important issues.

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[4] Wiss, Janney, Elstner Associates, Inc., "Minnesota Single-Exit Stairway Apartment Building Study". December 12, 2025. Prepared for State of Minnesota Department of Labor and Industry. https://www.dli.mn.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/TAG-single-exit-stairway-121225-handout.pdf

[5] Wiss, Janney, Elstner Associates, Inc. "Single Egress Stairway Apartment Building Study". December 12, 2025. Prepared for State of Minnesota Department of Labor and Industry. https://www.dli.mn.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/TAG-single-exit-stairway-121225-handout2.pdf

[6] Hatchett, Chase, "States Advance Single-Stairway Reforms to Expand Housing," 2025, https://www.pew.org/en/research-and-analysis/articles/2025/11/04/states-advance-single-stairway-reforms-to-expand-housing

[7] Center for Building in North America, "Single-stair reform tracker," https://www.centerforbuilding.org/trackers?tracker=indiana&section=single-stairs