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THE MARYLAND HOUSE OF DELEGATES ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

Testimony in Support of HB 489 Maryland Department of Labor - Study on Building Code Requirements for Single-Staircase Buildings

Testimony by Delegate Vaughn Stewart
February 11th, 2025 | Environment & Transportation Committee

What the Bill Does:

HB 489 directs the Maryland Department of Labor, in consultation with members of the fire safety community, to study the potential of single-staircase buildings as a tool for increasing affordable housing.

The study will examine Maryland's current building code requirements and compare them to other states and countries, identify best practices for single-staircase design, and develop policy recommendations based on the findings of the study. By December 1, 2025, the Department will deliver findings and recommendations to the Governor and the General Assembly.

Why the Bill is Important:

Many cities and states across the country are considering legislation to allow low-rise, multifamily buildings to be built with just one staircase shared amongst the units, rather than the two staircases required by nearly all building codes in North America. In Virginia, a bill very similar to HB489 unanimously passed through their General Assembly and became law last year.

Single-staircase buildings are the norm across Europe and Canada, where there are far fewer fire deaths per capita. Without the requirement for a second staircase, buildings can be laid out in a more efficient way that is less costly to construct. Single-stair designs deliver more of the light, air, and acoustic privacy typically provided by detached single-family buildings. Light on two or three sides facilitates multi-bedroom suites even in compact floor plates. These buildings also facilitate community building.

These buildings—paired with robust fire suppression systems and advanced safety

technologies—offer a chance to lower construction costs, maximize usable space, and provide more affordable housing options for working families, seniors, and young professionals.

Why the Committee Should Vote Favorably:

HB489 is a pragmatic step toward safer and more abundant affordable housing. Fire safety is a serious issue and the General Assembly shouldn't consider such a significant change in its building codes without rigorous evaluation.

I urge a favorable report.