Breaking the Mold: Colorado's Single-Stair Innovation

Submitted By: Maiker Housing Partners

Organization Profile

Organization Name: State of Colorado

Organization Type: Subnational government

Website: https://co.colorado.gov

Practice Details

Country(ies): United States of America

City(ies): Colorado municipalities with populations over 100,000

Start Year: 2027 **Ongoing:** Yes **End Year:** N/A

Main Adequate Housing Components:



Housing Thematic Areas:



Relevant SDGs:



UN-HABITAT

Problem & Context

In 2021, a resident of affordable housing challenged me: “All these buildings look the same, they don’t work for families, and you’re warehousing us.” Their words revealed a deeper truth—Colorado’s building code, rooted in outdated national standards, mandated two stairwells for all multifamily buildings over three stories. This eliminated cost-efficient, family-friendly mid-rise designs common worldwide, driving up costs, reducing unit diversity, and forcing developers toward uniform “double-loaded” corridors. The absence of a policy pathway for single-stair designs was a silent but powerful barrier to affordability, livability, and sustainability.

Solution Developed

We pursued Colorado’s Single-Stair Reform through two consecutive bills. The first, in 2024, sought to modernize codes to permit up to five-story multifamily buildings with one fire-rated stairwell—common in Europe and Asia—but faced opposition framed around safety concerns. In 2025, we built momentum by hosting a single-stair design competition with policymakers and expanding stakeholder engagement. We refined the bill with non-combustible construction, enhanced sprinklers, fire department access, and strict inspections, leading to passage of HB25-1273. This reintroduced housing types with family-sized units, cross-ventilation, and natural light at lower cost. Target beneficiaries include low- and middle-income households, families seeking livable multifamily homes, and communities needing diverse, walkable housing. Objectives: remove outdated code barriers, lower per-unit costs, diversify housing form, and enable mixed-income living. Innovations included reframing the change as safety-first and livability-focused, leveraging a bipartisan coalition, centering resident voices, and creating a replicable legislative model balancing affordability, sustainability, and life safety.

Implementation

Actions: We led a two-year advocacy and education campaign to reform Colorado’s outdated building codes. In 2024, we introduced the first Single-Stair bill, hosting forums, media briefings, and legislative hearings. After its defeat, we addressed opposition concerns, added safety provisions, and reintroduced the bill in 2025. Efforts included resident storytelling, listening sessions with architects and fire safety experts, a grant-funded design competition, and direct legislative engagement to build bipartisan support.

Actors: Led by Peter and Sean, key actors included the Colorado General Assembly, Governor’s Office, Department of Local Affairs, municipal building departments, fire authorities, affordable housing developers, architects, urbanists, and resident advocates—each refining policy, ensuring safety, and aligning reform with housing needs.

Timeline:

- 2021 – Resident challenge sparks research.
- 2022–2023 – Coalition building, technical analysis, drafting.
- 2024 – First bill introduced, debated, defeated.
- 2025 – Design competition hosted by Governor Polis; bill refined, passed as HB25-1273, signed into law.

Resources: Supported by in-kind partner contributions, Mercatus Center grant, Pew Charitable Trust research, Harvard Joint Center research, private-sector design expertise, and pro bono fire safety consultation. No direct state funding; implementation absorbed into municipal code adoption.

Enablers & Obstacles

Enablers: Bipartisan legislative sponsors, Governor's Office engagement, and early coalition-building with architects, fire safety experts, and housing advocates drove momentum. Resident voices grounded the effort, while international precedents, Pew Charitable Trust, Harvard, and Mercatus Center research added credibility.

Obstacles: Opposition came from fire safety officials, some industry stakeholders, and segments of the affordable housing community who feared the code would yield too few affordable units and be used mainly for market-rate or luxury projects. Media narratives often amplified these concerns. We addressed them by adding safety provisions, demonstrating pro forma feasibility for affordable projects, and reframing the reform as serving all income levels. This skepticism has begun to dissipate as stakeholders see its broad potential.

Results & Impact

Since the 2025 passage of HB25-1273, discussions on code adoption are underway in major Colorado jurisdictions, with Denver leading the charge and others in early review. Early developer interest shows a pipeline of mid-rise projects using single-stair designs, with preliminary pro formas showing 8–15% per-unit cost savings over double-stair construction. These savings improve the feasibility of mixed-income developments and expand opportunities for affordable units in walkable, high-opportunity neighborhoods.

For low-income households and marginalized groups, the reform opens access to housing types previously out of reach: family-sized apartments with cross-ventilation, natural light, and layouts that foster dignity and community—moving beyond the "double-loaded corridor" model common in multifamily housing.

Long-term impacts include greater housing supply elasticity, reduced rent pressures, and socio-economic integration through mixed-income buildings. Environmental benefits include reduced embodied carbon, smaller footprints, and support for transit-oriented density.

Yet, implementation faces headwinds. Local control advocates are pursuing legal challenges to statewide housing interventions, with HB25-1273 among the contested measures. Despite this, the reform has shifted perceptions—emerging as a nationally watched example of safety-conscious, livability-focused code modernization.

Replication & Scale Up

Across the U.S., single-stair reform is gaining momentum. Seattle, New York City, and Honolulu have long allowed mid-rise buildings with a single staircase. Los Angeles is moving to permit up to six-story designs. Texas, Montana, and Connecticut passed statewide reforms in 2025, while Tennessee enacted opt-in language in 2024 now adopted by cities like Knoxville and Memphis. Washington State is preparing code changes for 2026, and bills are advancing in California, Minnesota, Virginia, and Oregon—reflecting growing recognition of its safety and housing benefits.

Scaling up means extending single-stair adoption to Colorado cities under 100K residents, aligning with social housing and deep affordability goals. This can deliver family-friendly, cost-efficient homes in opportunity-rich areas near jobs, schools, transit, and healthy food. It supports desegregation of land use and can bridge into affordable homeownership by enabling lower-cost condo development, expanding ownership for low- and moderate-income households statewide.

Policy Uptake

This housing practice has been fully adopted into formal policy frameworks and legislation, and is being implemented at scale with institutional support.

HB25-1273, passed in 2025, embedded single-stair reform into Colorado law, requiring adoption in municipalities over 100K residents. It is integrated into state code frameworks with safety provisions, inspection protocols, and compliance timelines. Implementation is backed by the Governor's Office, Department of Local Affairs, municipal building departments, and fire authorities, with research and advocacy funded by the Mercatus Center and Pew Charitable Trusts, positioning it for scale statewide.

Lessons & Takeaways

In hindsight, we would have engaged affordable housing stakeholders earlier to address concerns about deep affordability and market-rate dominance, and expanded outreach to smaller municipalities sooner. We would have paired policy advocacy with more resident-led design sessions and public education to counter safety myths more quickly. Strengthening early communications and broadening coalition-building could have accelerated consensus and reduced initial opposition.