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Testimony in Support of Int. 58, The Grab Bar Bill
(Keep Seniors Standing)

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When I began my home safety program for older adults five years ago, I convened a New York City Task Force of over 20 agencies who identified fall risk in the bathing and toilet areas as a significant obstacle to safe aging-in-place. It is well documented in the literature that older adults are at an increased risk for bathroom injuries due to chronic impairments, including arthritis and gait & balance disorders. These impairments make movement in the bathtub and toilet areas a high-risk activity.

Getting in and out of the bathtub without supportive handholds, in an area where there are wet, soapy and slippery surfaces, is an injury waiting to happen. To help prevent a fall while in the bathtub, especially when climbing over the side of the tub, older adults usually hold onto *unsafe* supports to help stabilize themselves. In lieu of protective grab bars, they hold onto wet edges of sinks, flimsy shower curtains that cannot support body weight, or slippery water faucets that are hard to grasp.

Many older adults have weakened quadriceps, and getting up from the toilet without safe handholds can be a hazardous endeavor. In lieu of grab bars, many grasp the nearest room feature, be it a doorknob, towel rack, or toilet tissue holder. Others rely on the helping hand of caregiver, putting the caregiver at risk for injury.

Even though safety modifications are now recognized by health care professionals as a key element in helping older adults remain in their own homes, five obstacles to intervention abound.

- 1). **Lack of prevention.** Environmental hazards are often overlooked until injuries occur. Environmental hazards include bathtubs without grab bars.
- 2). **Misperceptions about the nature of hazards.** Believing that the problem is exclusively the aging person, rather than the poor environment-person fit.
- 3). **Lack of education on tenant's rights.** Older renters are not aware of the laws (Fair Housing Amendments Act and the New York City Human Rights Law) that allow tenants to make "*reasonable accommodations*" to their dwelling. Consequently,

many do not consider installing grab bars even when these supports are necessary for their function and safety.

4). **Common Installation Methods May Not Meet Building Code.** Two years ago, I convened a Grab Bar Safety Installation Group. Along with the Eastern Paralyzed Veteran's Association, we pilot tested various fasteners to ascertain if they passed the building code requirement, which is 250 pounds of force. Enclosed you will find the test results. Our data showed that plastic anchors, a common installation method, did not meet code, but certain cost-efficient toggle bolts did.

Int. 58 should increase public safety by addressing the need for adequate installation methods so grab bars would safely support a person's weight, especially during a fall.

5). **Funding & Service Delivery.** Paying for grab bars and installation, and coordinating the service delivery, is beyond the capabilities of many older adults.

Final Thoughts

Over the years, many environmental safety features that were viewed as optional, including window guards for children, are now regarded as mandatory for public safety. Similar to window guards, this bill would ensure that all older adults, regardless of income, have access to protective devices appropriate for their age group.

It would behoove the New York community to follow the safety guidelines from the Centers for Disease Control, which recommends that all older adults use grab bars in the bathroom to reduce **preventable** falls. With the new demographic imperative, we have no time to lose!

It is my opinion that New York City should pass the Grab Bar Bill and take an active step to help reduce **preventable** falls.