

# Learn More and Make a Difference

When we invest in the arts, civic  
life, and culture that connect us,  
our communities thrive.

To learn more about the Rhode Island  
Foundation’s work in this priority area,  
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To support organizations and initiatives working to advance civic  
and cultural life across Rhode Island, you may direct your gift to  
the Fund for Civic and Cultural Life at [rifoundation.org](http://rifoundation.org).

## Our Approach

Learning is most meaningful when it happens alongside our partners. As part of our  
Learning & Impact framework, we examine our support at two levels: the results of  
individual grants, and the bigger picture across our full portfolio. To do that, we draw  
on multiple sources: grantee experiences and outcomes, site visits, conversations,  
and community-level data. We recognize that positive change happens through the  
efforts of many, and these briefs are our way of capturing that collaborative impact.

Only together can we learn, respond, and build a better Rhode Island.

# Civic and Cultural Life

Learning and Impact Brief **September 2026**

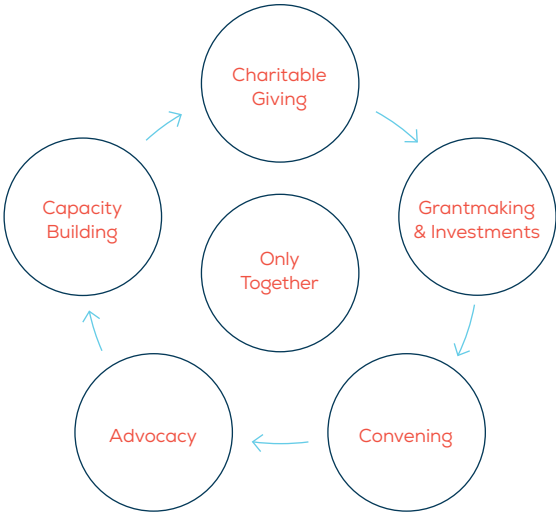
# Who We Are & What We Do

Together, we lift every voice.

We're committed to expanding civic, arts, and cultural opportunities that bring together people of diverse backgrounds to sustain equitable, thriving communities.

When community members are better connected with each other and with the places they live, we see increases in a range of positive factors including physical health, employment rates, and resilience and response to emergencies.

We invest in connections that bridge differences, build common ground, and create lasting trust.



## Civic and Cultural Life Grantmaking at a Glance

Total 2025 Civic and Cultural Life Core  
Grant Making dollars awarded

\$3.5 M

Total Number of  
Grantees Supported

44

## Our Investment & Focus Areas



Enhancing access to trusted news and information sources, including support of independent local journalism.



Improving K-12 access to high-quality civics learning opportunities and greater access to civics professional development for educators.



Creating spaces and opportunities for community connection, volunteering, and arts and cultural activities.



Innovative, collaborative initiatives beyond the stated focus areas with potential to drive greater impact on civic and cultural life – particularly those that address inequities and/or advance solutions across multiple community priorities.

## Organizations We Support



East Greenwich News  
ecoRI, Inc.  
Latino Public Radio  
New England First Amendment Coalition  
Rhode Island News Media Archive  
The Public's Radio/Ocean State Media



American Exchange Project  
Generation Citizen  
Rhode Island Department of State



AS220  
Ballet Rhode Island  
Blackstone Valley Prevention Coalition  
Community Libraries of Providence  
Community MusicWorks  
DownCity Design  
Educational Center for Arts & Science  
FirstWorks  
Lit Arts RI  
Little Compton Historical Society, Inc.  
Mixed Magic Theatre & Cultural Events  
NewportFILM  
Oasis International  
Ocean Community United Theatre  
Rhode Island Black Heritage Society  
Rhode Island Black Storytellers  
Rhode Island Philharmonic Orchestra & Music School  
Sandra Feinstein-Gamm Theatre



South County Art Association  
Stadium Theatre Foundation  
The Contemporary Theater Company  
The Manton Avenue Project  
The Steel Yard  
Tomaquag Museum  
Trinity Repertory Company  
Wilbury Theatre Group  
  
Center for Indigenous Peoples Rights  
Common Cause Education Fund  
Girl Scouts of Southeastern New England  
Latino Policy Institute  
Rhode Island Humanities  
Rhode Island KIDS COUNT, Inc.  
SISTA Fire  
Women's Fund of Rhode Island  
Towards An Anti-Racist North Kingstown

## Donor Spotlight Putting the Pieces Together



Susan Gonsalves has spent a lifetime immersed in the arts, from piano lessons at age seven, to designing costumes and sets for community theatre, to ballroom dancing. A native Rhode Islander with a Ph.D. in pharmacology, Susan spent decades in medical research, including years at Pfizer. The same curiosity she cultivated in her professional life guides her giving.

Through the Susan F. Gonsalves Charitable Fund at the Rhode Island Foundation, Susan supports smaller, diverse arts organizations, primarily theaters, doing

innovative work, including The Manton Avenue Project and The Wilbury Theatre Group.

Identifying these lesser-known groups was its own challenge, one where the Foundation's long-standing relationships and understanding of community needs made the difference, connecting Susan directly to theaters and arts groups shaping Rhode Island's cultural landscape.

"I would never have found these organizations and projects myself," she shares. "There are so many – how could I find these? The Foundation is able to look in depth at what's going on behind the scenes...an organization's history, books, progress, and outcomes."

For Susan, supporting the arts is about something larger than any one production or stage. "The arts allow us the ability to see life from another perspective; it enriches your life," she reflects. "Being part of the artistic experience liberates and stretches your mind, helps you to understand the human experience...to put the pieces together to make a coherent whole."

# Creating Spaces for Connection, Volunteering, and Arts and Cultural Activities

Arts and cultural experiences do more than entertain. They help weave the civic fabric that holds communities together. Across Rhode Island, our grantees are creating thousands of opportunities for residents to come together, participate, and engage more deeply in the places they call home.

1,411

Number of events, performances and workshops supported

527,740

Number of individual experiences

100%

Grantees providing free or subsidized offerings

4x

The likelihood of civic and community engagement among people who participate in the arts compared to those who don't.<sup>1</sup>

## What We're Learning

### Civic and cultural life is connective tissue.

When people actively participate in arts and cultural experiences, they are nearly four times more likely to participate in civic life by attending community meetings, volunteering, and doing charitable work. At a time when more than half of U.S. adults report feeling isolated, arts and cultural opportunities offer a proven pathway back to connection and civic engagement.

### Connections are hard to measure.

Through our support of the Rhode Island Civic Health Index, published by Rhode Island Humanities in 2022, and its forthcoming 2027 follow-up, we're learning that civic health is reflected in relationships: people's sense of connection to one another, whether they feel heard, how rooted they are in their communities, and their trust in the institutions around them. These are hard things to measure, but

they're also powerful signals. We're working with grantee partners and others engaged in this work to better understand how to quantify these connections – and how our support is shaping civic health over time.

### Partnership is how this work gets done.

Nearly all our Civic and Cultural Life grantees are working in active partnership with schools, community organizations, and government agencies, reflecting a shared understanding that civic and cultural life is made stronger through collaboration.

### Accessible programming is the foundation of equitable civic and cultural life.

Across our work supporting arts, culture, and community connection, every grantee partner offers free or subsidized programming, and 98% are actively advancing equity and inclusion, working to

ensure that civic and cultural opportunities are open to everyone.

### Access to local news and civic education remains uneven across Rhode Island.

More than a third of Rhode Islanders struggle to find reliable local news, and fewer than half of our state's students feel ready to take an active role in their communities. The Rhode Island Foundation is working to close both gaps. Press Forward Rhode Island – our chapter of a national funder network that invests in local news, launched with the van Beuren Charitable Foundation – is expanding access to trustworthy information. And through the Rhode Island Department of State, our grant support is helping students learn to listen, ask hard questions, and engage with viewpoints different from their own.

98%

Grantees supporting Equity & Inclusion

97%

Grantee efforts involving partnerships (such as with schools, community organizations, state and local government agencies)

34%

Share of Rhode Islanders who say it's difficult to find reliable sources for local news and information<sup>2</sup>

42%

Share of students who feel prepared for active community participation through knowledge of government and individual rights/responsibilities<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The Great Connector: How Arts Participation Renews Civic and Community Engagement, National Endowment for the Arts, 2026

<sup>2</sup> Summary Deck: Rhode Islanders' Views on Local News, RI Foundation Commissioned Survey by Hart Research, November 2025

<sup>3</sup> The State of Civic Education in Rhode Island, Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement/Tufts, Rhode Island Civic Learning Coalition, Generation Citizen, 2022

\*Projected impacts during the grant period. Metrics underrepresent impact due to variations in the data that grantees track and report.

## Grantee Impact Summaries

### SISTA Fire



Since 2017, SISTA Fire has been building the collective power of women and nonbinary people of color across Rhode Island through community organizing, leadership development, healing justice, and participatory action research. Grounded in the belief that the people most impacted by injustice are best positioned to create solutions, SISTA Fire equips members to shape the policies and systems that affect their lives.

Monthly Justice Circles serve as the organization's political home, where members build relationships, strengthen political analysis, deepen leadership, and develop organizing strategies rooted in their lived experience. Through member-led committees, participatory research, and collective decision making, members identify community priorities, design campaigns, and lead advocacy efforts that advance racial, economic, and gender justice.

SISTA Fire's members are navigating rising housing costs, economic insecurity, caregiving responsibilities, and persistent racial inequities. Rather than treating these challenges as isolated issues, members organize across them to build long-term community power. Their leadership has helped advance statewide victories, including Rhode Island's Baby Bonds legislation, expanded access to doula care, and campaigns for cash assistance, housing stability, and birth equity. Today, members are leading the development of a People's Care Agenda, a long-term community-driven vision that will guide future organizing and policy priorities across Rhode Island.

Support from the Rhode Island Foundation helps strengthen this work by expanding leadership development, organizing capacity, and partnerships across the state. Working alongside coalitions such as DARE's Tenants and Homeowners Association and the

Raising RI Coalition, while creating healing and cultural spaces like Liberated Circles and 2Queer4Fear, SISTA Fire demonstrates that lasting civic and economic change is achieved when communities most affected by injustice define the priorities, develop the solutions, and lead the work to transform systems.

### Rhode Island Department of State Civic Leadership Program



The Rhode Island Civic Leadership Program is a yearlong, immersive, nonpartisan initiative designed to connect high school students across Rhode Island to their government. Each year, teachers and school administrators nominate civically engaged students in grades 10 through 12 to serve as Student Civic Liaisons and participate in monthly sessions at the State House led by public officials, community leaders, and Department of State staff.

Civility and community advocacy are staple topics at every session.

The program culminates in the Rhode Island Civic Leadership Summit, a three-day experiential learning program at the State House. The Summit connects students directly with all three branches of state government, providing opportunities to meet policymakers, observe courtroom proceedings, and take part in a mock legislative session to debate real legislation with assigned party roles, experiencing firsthand what civil discourse looks like in practice. All students attend at no cost.

The Rhode Island Foundation supported the inaugural Civic Leadership Summit, which has grown in size and reach each year, connecting young people to each other, to new perspectives, to their government, and to what it means to participate thoughtfully in civic life.