

Civic and Cultural Life

As Rhode Island's only community foundation, we're committed to expanding civic and cultural opportunities that bring together people of diverse backgrounds to sustain equitable, thriving communities.

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

Focus Areas

- Enhancing access to trusted news and information sources, including support of independent local journalism.
- Creating spaces and opportunities for community connection, volunteering, and arts and cultural activities.
- Improving K-12 access to high-quality civics learning opportunities and greater access to civics professional development for educators.
- Innovative, collaborative initiatives beyond the stated focus areas with potential to drive greater impact on civic and cultural life – particularly those with an equity focus and/or advancing solutions across multiple community priorities.

Case Studies

Fostering Civic Action

The goal of the Rhode Island Civic Leadership Summit, funded by the Rhode Island Foundation, is to foster a lifelong passion for public service and civic action, whether that be in government, the non-profit community, or corporate stewardship.

The Summit is the culmination of the broader Student Civic Liaison Program sponsored by Rhode Island's Secretary of State. More than 85 students from 41 high schools throughout Rhode Island participated in the inaugural program.

Since June 2023, the program has introduced local students to government and community leaders through monthly workshops that facilitate collaboration around civic action projects in the participants' own communities. There is no fee for participation.

United Theatre

Westerly's United Theatre opened in 1926 and became a cultural icon for the arts in Rhode Island.

But by 1986 the theater faded into disuse. Fortunately, an ambitious revival of the United Theatre was launched. The State Cultural Bond Initiative approved in 2014 helped to secure funds towards its restoration, with the United Theater establishing itself as a non-profit the following year.

In May 2019, when the multi-million-dollar project to create a multi-use arts complex broke ground, it became apparent that the board could no longer operate as a solely volunteer-run organization.

The Rhode Island Foundation stepped up with a grant that provided additional resources, making it possible for the United Theatre to hire an executive director.

With Rhode Island Foundation support, the United Theatre now provides Westerly with its first year-round venue for jazz, opera, ballet, modern dance and popular music; a gallery for visual artists; its first multi-screen art house cinema; and education space; and a community music school.

Ocean State Stories

In 2022, the Rhode Island Foundation committed \$87,500 to a project at the Pell Center at Salve Regina University to revitalize long-form journalism in Rhode Island.

Ocean State Stories (OSS) was launched in February 2023. The goals of OSS are to publish stories that matter to Rhode Islanders, develop a diverse network of freelance journalists to help nurture the next generation of reporters, and cultivate an audience of readers of long-form journalism.

OceanStateStories.org opened with the first of a two-part series on food insecurity and a Q&A with Paige Clausius-Parks, executive director of Rhode Island Kids Count.

Since then, Ocean State Stories has published a story and Q&A every week—ranging from behavioral health to domestic violence, from antisemitism to book censorship.

From the first week of publication, OSS's reach has been broadened by publication in print partners: The Warwick Beacon, Cranston Herald, and Johnston SunRise.

All of Ocean State Stories' content is published in Spanish and English. A growing roster of freelance writers—established journalists and college students on a journalism track—has brought distinguished reporting to the site.