

2024



National Civic League

Rhode Island

Action Guide for Improving Civic Health



Tools and strategies for assessing and improving civic health, opportunities, and infrastructure in Rhode Island, with key examples



Rhode Island Foundation

For over a century, the Rhode Island Foundation has partnered with communities across the state to help all Rhode Islanders thrive.

The Foundation uses its local roots and statewide relationships to gather people around common issues, support local leaders, and transform ideas, building on the trust and generosity of Rhode Islanders to act on challenges for the common good.



This guide was written by Matt Leighninger and Benita Duran, Center for Democracy Innovation (CDI) at the National Civic League, and designed by Rachel Fersh. CDI works with communities across the U.S. to understand, test, and disseminate the next generation of civic innovations, which have the potential to make democracy more participatory, equitable, and productive.

Founded in 1894 by Teddy Roosevelt, Louis Brandeis, and Mary Mumford, the Civic League championed the democracy innovations of the early 20th Century; today the League hosts

CDI, maintains the Model City Charter, organizes the All-America City Award, publishes the *National Civic Review*, and supports an extensive national network of local elected, appointed, and civic leaders.

Foreword

Dear Friends,

We are proud to be our state's only community foundation.

For over a century, through deep engagement and collaboration with community partners, we have strived to improve the lives of all Rhode Islanders.

Continuing the work of promoting a thriving state and the well-being of its people requires strong civic engagement. This means creating opportunities for community discussion, supporting trustworthy local news, information, and journalism, connecting with each other through the arts, amplifying the voices of underrepresented communities, and reinforcing civic education and volunteerism, among many other activities and initiatives that bring people together to address common challenges and achieve shared priorities.

However, deepening divisions in our society, an increasing loss of faith in our institutions, and a growing sense of isolation and loneliness felt by many have all intensified over time.

These trends pose a serious threat to civic and cultural life in our state, and if left unaddressed, the erosion of vital community connections will ultimately undermine our ability to address challenges that impact our daily lives – issues ranging from public education to affordable housing and health care, environmental justice, economic opportunity, and beyond.

Since I joined the Rhode Island Foundation in June of 2023, we have been undertaking an important effort to gather the ideas and perspectives of team members, the public, community partners, donors, grantees, and stakeholders.



David N. Cicilline
President & CEO
Rhode Island Foundation

The gathering of these ideas and perspectives is critically important to ensuring the work of our organization is focused on what matters most to Rhode Islanders. Through this process, we have heard the call to strengthen the quality of civic opportunities and enhance the civic infrastructure that brings together people of different backgrounds and points of view to help sustain equitable, thriving communities.

We partnered with the National Civic League (NCL), a non-partisan and deeply respected organization that has been at the forefront of civic innovation for more than 125 years, to help develop this *Action Guide for Improving Civic Health in Rhode Island*. To help inform the content and recommendations of this guide, the Rhode Island Foundation and the National Civic League convened more than 30 participants engaged in this space to discuss the status of our state's civic infrastructure, and NCL conducted a series of interviews with organizations and individuals of different backgrounds and political perspectives, who are deeply involved in advancing civic opportunities across Rhode Island.

We hope this guide will serve as a starting point and initial set of tools and strategies to help communities, individuals, and groups across Rhode Island promote efforts to enhance civic health throughout our state.

Thank you,

David



SHOPPING ON THAMES STREET IN NEWPORT, RI

PHOTO BY KENNETH C. ZIRKEL

INTRODUCTION

Civic health matters.

Strong, ongoing connections between residents, robust relationships between people and public institutions, and positive attachments between citizens and the places they live are highly correlated with a range of positive outcomes, from better physical health to higher employment rates to better resilience in the face of natural disasters.

Civic health is based on the quality of civic opportunities and the strength of civic infrastructure. When these supports are weak, people of different backgrounds and political perspectives are less likely to communicate or work together, which exacerbates partisan polarization. When these supports are distributed inequitably, they deepen economic and social inequities.

This guide describes a range of tools and strategies to assess and improve civic health, opportunities, and infrastructure in Rhode Island. The guide also lists examples of some of these ideas already being implemented in the state.

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SECTION 1

Assessment Tools

Assessment tools to illuminate the state of civic health and the impact of the organizations working to strengthen democracy and social capital

To improve civic health, we need to be able to measure it more easily, and in a wider variety of ways. We need to know the overall levels of voting, volunteerism, membership in neighborhood and school associations, participation in public decision-making, and other kinds of civic activities.

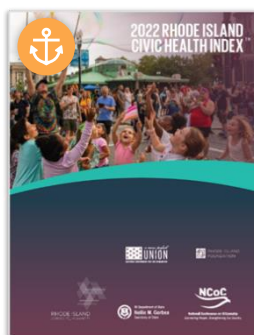
We also need to understand the strength of and interconnections between the organizations and networks that inspire, coordinate, and support those activities: a community’s civic infrastructure. Finally, we need a sense of how citizens view their

civic opportunities: do they feel well informed and connected? Do they think they have a meaningful say in public decision? Do they feel their civic work is supported and honored?

Types of Assessment Tools	
	Census-based indices
	Comprehensive reports
	Survey-based reports
	Digital ratings or audit systems



Census-Based Indices



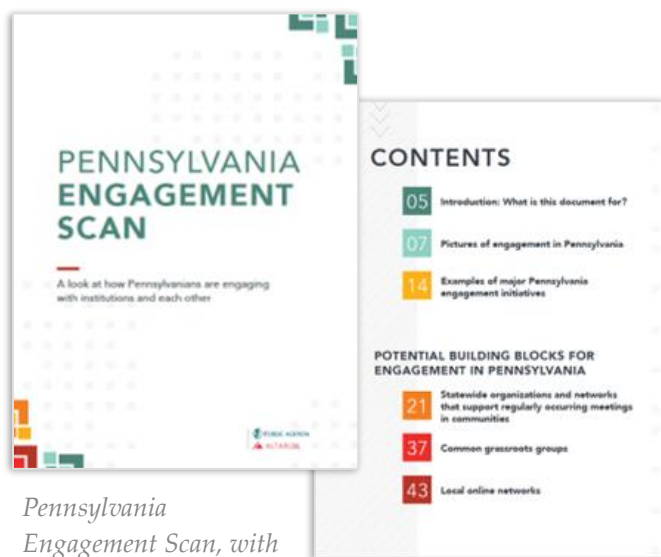
Census-based indices measure citizen attitudes based on how people answer specific Census questions.

The [RHODE ISLAND CIVIC HEALTH INDEX](#), released in 2022, uses information from the U.S. Census and other sources to report on five areas of civic health in the state: community well-being, social connections, public participation, collective understanding, and engagement with government.

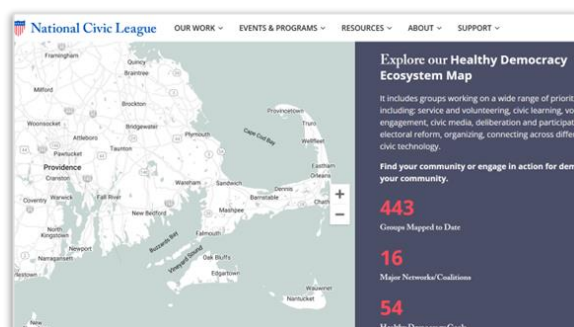


Comprehensive Reports

Comprehensive reports, based on interview and desk research, describe the civic infrastructure of a place, including programs and organizations that are key civic assets, the recent history of initiatives for engaging the public, barriers to and equity in engagement, and information on how people are connected, both in-person and online.



Pennsylvania Engagement Scan, with list of topics.



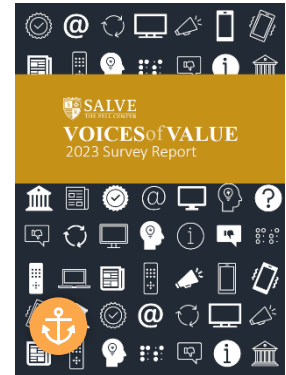
The [Healthy Democracy Ecosystem Map](#) will provide the first comprehensive look at the universe of organizations promoting healthy democracy in Rhode Island and across America. Currently in development, the Map will help identify strengths and gaps in civic infrastructure.



Survey-Based Reports

Survey-based reports gauge citizen attitudes toward government, other institutions, and other groups of people.

For example, Salve Regina University's Pell Center produced the "Voices of Value" report, which details findings from a survey of nearly 900 registered voters in Rhode Island, gauging their perceptions of the health of U.S. Democracy.



Digital Ratings / Audit Systems

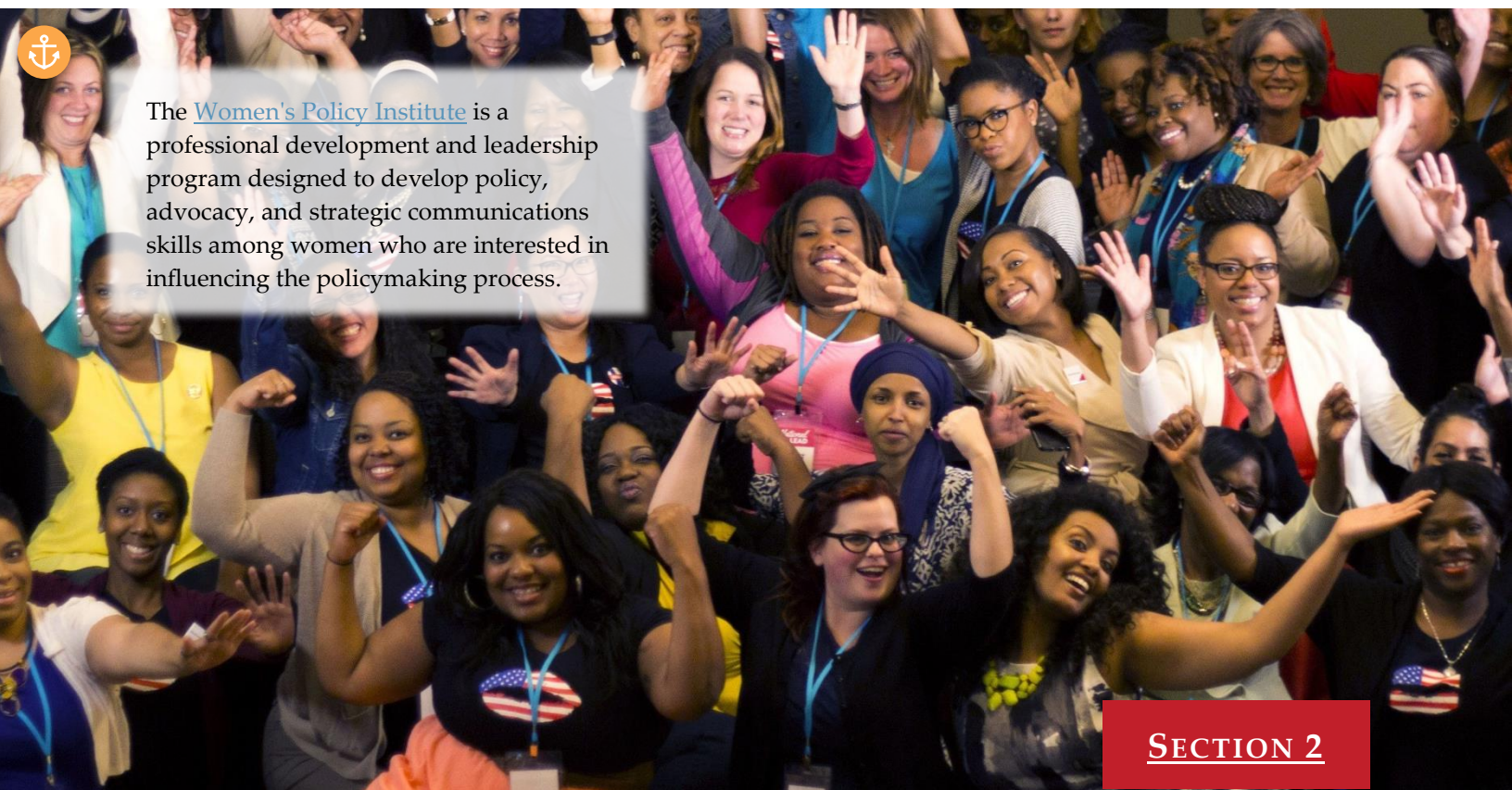
Digital ratings or audit systems give people the chance to provide quick assessments of civic opportunities. The National Civic League's [CIVIC ENGAGEMENT SCORECARD](#), for example, allows people to rate public meetings, other engagement processes, and the state of democracy in their community.



Civic Engagement Scorecard for Boulder, Colorado.



The Wheel of Civic Opportunities, from the [Mapping Civic Measurement](#) report by the Institute for Citizens and Scholars, shows all the ways that institutions and organizations can help people understand their communities and country, participate in public decision-making and problem-solving, develop positive beliefs about democracy, and connect with one another.



The [Women's Policy Institute](#) is a professional development and leadership program designed to develop policy, advocacy, and strategic communications skills among women who are interested in influencing the policymaking process.

SECTION 2

Forming Leadership Groups

Suggestions for forming local cross-sector leadership groups, including more formal structures, such as engagement commissions

Improving civic health should be a cross-sector, community-wide priority. Elected officials, nonprofit leaders, grassroots organizers, business leaders, school leaders, faith leaders, academics, and other community members all have roles to play. This work should be led by diverse sets of people who are tasked with developing recommendations, overseeing implementation, and measuring impacts.

There are several best practices for supporting civic health leadership that are important to keep in mind.

Best Practices to Support Civic Leaders

-  Recruit for Diversity
-  Emphasize Engagement
-  Promote Hands-On Learning
-  Provide a Clear Mandate
-  Encourage Measurement

Recruit for Diversity

In assembling leaders, think broadly about different kinds of diversity, including racial and ethnic backgrounds, political affiliation, age, education, economics, and religion. Regularly ask, “Who is not at the table who ought to be here?”

 Emphasize Engagement

Clarify that being a civic health leader means that you are trying to help engage people directly, not just represent their interests.

[illegible]

Liz Subin of the Pennywise Foundation and Sue McCormack of Creative Discourse created this timeline as part of a planning session for engagement leaders in Essex, VT.

Promote Hands-On Learning

Give leaders the chance to ‘sample’ different types of civic health activities (such as the ones in sections 3a-h of this guide), so that they understand them better.

 Provide a Clear Mandate

Should this leadership group be organizing civic health initiatives?
Communicating and advocating for

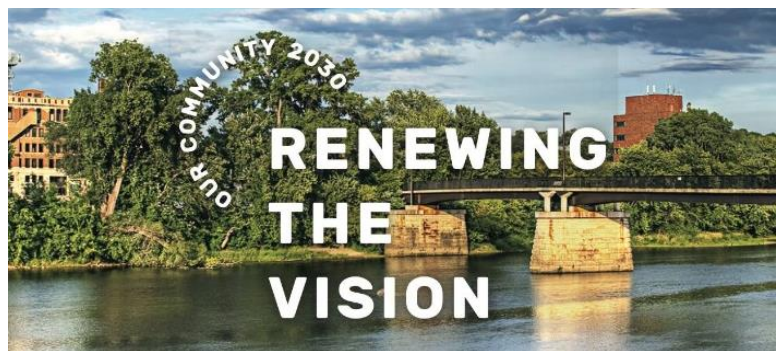
initiatives that already exist? Convening and connecting people doing this work? Assessing individual efforts? Measuring civic health overall? All of the above?



FountainHeadRI is a leadership group providing connections and skills to younger leaders, primarily in the business community, but across other sectors as well.

 Encourage Measurement

Provide leaders with the tools needed to measure civic health. Measurement will be fundamental to progress, no matter the specific mandate of the group.



In June 2007 the City of Eau Claire, WI collaborated with area governments, school institutions, and civil society organizations to implement [Clear Vision Eau Claire](#), an inclusive citizen-based community visioning and strategic planning initiative, with a mission “To engage our community for the common good.” They launched “Renewing the Vision” in 2018.

SECTION 3



The Australian Citizens' Parliament, a three-day deliberation in Canberra between randomly selected citizens who addressed how the Australian government could be strengthened to better serve the people.

Directly Engaging Citizens

Strategies and tools for directly engaging citizens in decision-making, problem-solving, and community-building

This section describes eight complementary strategies and tools (listed at right) for engaging people directly in ways that improve civic health. The strategies differ not only in their typical goals, strengths, and limitations, but also in whether they are primarily 'thick' or 'thin.'

Thick engagement is more intensive, informed, and deliberative. Most of the action happens in small-group discussion. Organizers assemble large and diverse numbers of people; give participants chances to share their experiences; present them with a range of views or policy options; and encourage action and change at multiple levels.

Engagement Tools & Strategies

- a) Deliberative Discussion
- b) Digital Engagement Tools
- c) Hybrid Strategies
- d) Official Public Meetings
- e) Community-Based Organizing
- f) Citizens' Assemblies
- g) Participatory Budgeting
- h) Ongoing Social Engagement



= Rhode Island Example

Thin engagement is faster, easier, and more convenient. It includes a range of activities that allow people to express their opinions, make choices, or affiliate themselves with a particular group or cause. It is less likely to build personal or community connections.

One way of summarizing the difference is to say that thick engagement empowers small groups and thin engagement empowers individuals. Thick participation opportunities are more likely to be face-to-face and thin ones are more likely to happen online. However, many thick processes include both online and face-to-face elements, and some examples of thin participation, such as signing a petition, certainly existed long before the internet.

This chart from Public Agenda's guide to [STRENGTHENING AND SUSTAINING PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT](#) shows one way of categorizing a range of strategies and tools for directly engaging citizens.

Public Engagement Tactics and Goals

TACTICS	GOALS					
	Inform the Public	Gather Input, Feedback & Preferences	Generate New Ideas & Info	Support Volunteerism & Problem-solving	Make a Public Decision	Create a Plan or Budget
Surveys and Polls		YES			YES with other tactics	YES with other tactics
Focus Groups		YES			YES with other tactics	YES with other tactics
Online Problem—Reporting Platforms (such as www.seedickfix.com)			YES	YES with other tactics		YES with other tactics
Idea Contests			YES	YES		YES with other tactics
Crowdfunding and Minigrants (such as www.ioby.org)			YES	YES		YES with other tactics
Serious Games	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES with other tactics	YES with other tactics
Asset Mapping	YES		YES	YES	YES with other tactics	YES with other tactics
Local Online Networks	YES	YES	YES with other tactics	YES	YES with other tactics	YES with other tactics
Charrettes and other Collaborative Planning Processes (see www.pps.org)			YES	YES		YES
Participatory Budgeting (see www.participatorybudgeting.org)	YES		YES	YES	YES with other tactics	YES
Study Circles and Deliberative Forums (see www.everyday-democracy.org)	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES

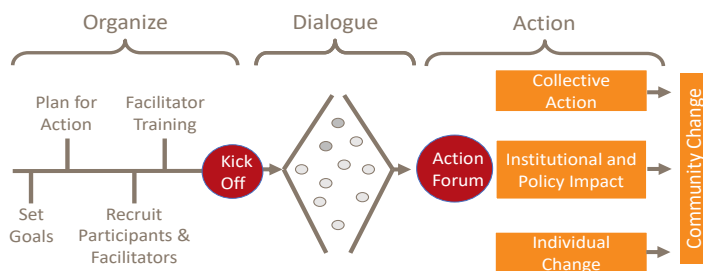
Adapted from Public Participation for 21st Century Democracy, Nabatchi and Leighninger 2015.

a) Deliberative Discussion

“Deliberative discussion” is a generic name for a format in which a small group of people (usually 8-10) meets in-person or by video call to talk about a public issue in a way that helps them connect, learn, and act. There are many other names for this very common kind of engagement, including: community conversations, deliberative forums, study circles. These are ‘thick’ activities (see p. 6), and they often occur as part of larger processes such as strategic planning, citizens’ assemblies (3f), and participatory budgeting (3g).

While a single community conversation can build relationships and help people learn, to maximize their impact – whether on policymakers, or by changing behavior, or by galvanizing volunteers – you need large numbers of people working in small groups (see the framework graphic below).

A Dialogue-to-Change Engagement Framework



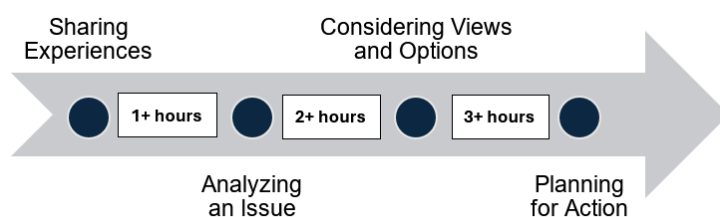
Organizing tasks and action steps to maximize the impact of a deliberative process.

Typical ingredients include:

♦ A **discussion handout or guide** that includes information on the issue being addressed, sample views or policy options, discussion questions, and

guidelines for structuring the conversation.

♦ A **sequence** that starts with people talking about why they came, then helps them analyze or learn about the situation, then helps them consider different options, then helps them plan for action. It usually takes people several hours to go through this sequence, either in one day or over a series of meetings (see diagram below).



A proven sequence for small-group deliberation.

♦ A **facilitator** who helps the group set ground rules (see example below), manage their time, and use the handout or guide.

Bob's Rules (Robert's kinder, gentler sibling)

- Respect other people, their ideas and opinions.
- Do not interrupt others.
- Try to say it in 25 words or less.
- Speak only to the topic at hand.
- No side conversations.
- When an idea has been stated previously and you agree, only speak when you have something new to add.
- Everyone gets a chance to share their opinion before someone speaks again.
- Speaking briefly and staying focused is everyone's responsibility. This will make the meeting run smoothly.
- These are everybody's rules and everyone is responsible for seeing that they are followed.

Example of small-group ground rules provided by Cece Hughley-Noel, Southeast Uplift in Portland, Oregon.



= Rhode Island Example

b) Digital Engagement Tools

There is a huge array of digital tools for engaging citizens directly, for many different goals and scenarios. Most but not all of these produce ‘thin’ forms of engagement (see p. 7) that work well when paired with ‘thick’ activities. Though they are often organized as stand-alone activities, they work best when part of larger initiatives.

Considerations when using digital tools:

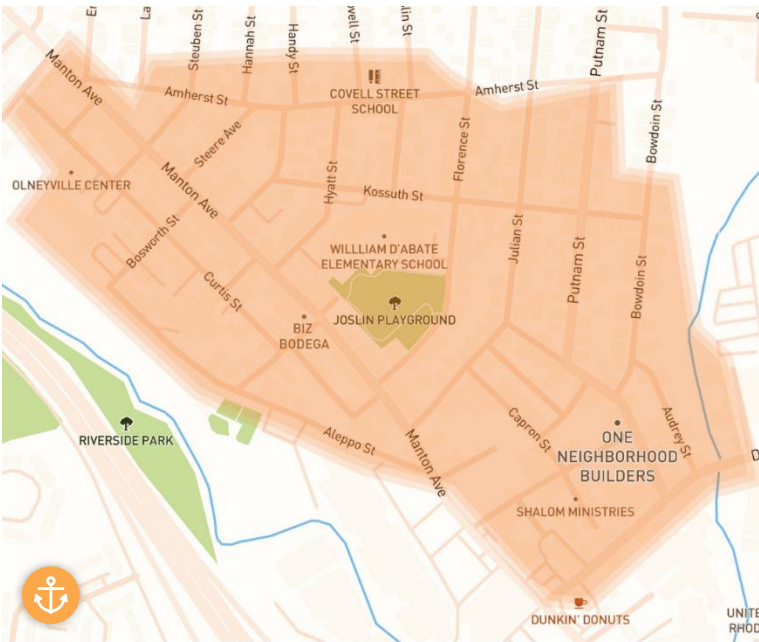
- ♦ The assortment of tools changes quickly over time – see the chart below for a snapshot that illustrates some of the kinds of things they can accomplish. The [CIVIC TECH FIELD GUIDE](#) includes a wide variety of “tech tools for public good.”

Digital tools for engagement (some of many)

General purpose	Some representative examples
Crowdsourcing and ideation	AllOurIdeas; MindMixer; IdeaScale
Gathering feedback on problems and services	SeeClickFix; FixMyStreet; PublicStuff
Crowdfunding	Kickstarter; ioby
Petitions	Change.org
Games	@stake; CommunityPlanIt; Civic IDEA
Mapping and wikis	LocalWiki; OpenStreetMap
Illustrating options and voting on them	Metroquest; Ethelo
Hyperlocal community-building	Nextdoor; Front Porch Forum
Finding common ground in large groups	Pol.is
Polling	Mentimeter

- ♦ It is important to keep in mind the persistence of ‘digital divides.’ Those who lack both high-speed internet service and a smartphone are disproportionately likely to be from certain segments of the population. And even among populations

with full access and the best devices, there are divides in terms of the skills people have to use the internet. (There are, of course, divides between different populations in whether they can participate in face-to-face meetings too.)



Network: OV Community WiFi - Free

[ONE|NB Connects](#) is a neighborhood-based, wire mesh, free community Wi-Fi internet system built in the Olneyville neighborhood of Providence to provide access to people living in poverty.

- ♦ Residents are often hesitant to share personal information because they do not know who their data will be shared with and how it will be used. They may be less likely to participate in activities that require them to log in to a service or download an app.
- ♦ Some digital tools are extensions or improvements of older strategies; for example, “survey panels” where people sign up to receive regular surveys on an

issue or their community can improve on traditional surveys because the sample of participants can become much larger and more diverse over time. These tools can help leaders create a positive “feedback loop” by reporting back to participants on how their input was used in decision-making (see [BeHEARD PHILLY](#) image, below).



***BeHEARD PHILLY**, one of the first large-scale survey panels, used regular surveys to engage residents of Philadelphia on issues and policies that affect them. Available by phone, web, or SMS, the panel grew to include over 10,000 diverse Philadelphians, across all city ZIP codes, recruited via street teams, transit advertising, and community events.*

- ♦ Simply offering a digital tool does not mean people will use it; all the same recruitment challenges and tactics (see Section 4) apply for digital strategies, just like they do for in-person meetings.

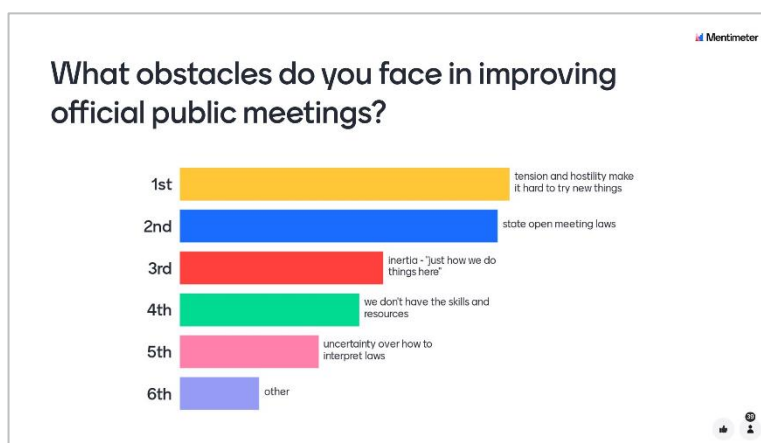
c) Hybrid Strategies

Some engagement strategies incorporate digital tools in an in-person process or

experience. Participants meet face-to-face, but they use their phones or other devices to get information, discussion questions, polling questions, opportunities to get more involved, and other resources. When participants enter their answers, the online tools can instantly show them how all the other respondents answered the same question. These kinds of strategies can combine some of the strengths of ‘thick’ and ‘thin’ forms of engagement (see pp. 6-7): people have the chance to learn, connect, and deliberate, at a place and time that is convenient to them, plus their input can be immediately aggregated and displayed. They can be synchronous (they allow people meeting at the same time to participate electronically as well as face-to-face) or asynchronous (people use the digital tool to meet wherever and whenever they want).

Types of hybrid strategies:

- ♦ **Real-time polling tools** like [MENTIMETER](#) that give people a chance to answer questions or give comments during an in-person meeting.



Example of a ranking slide produced using participants' live responses to a Mentimeter question.

♦ **Texting-based engagement strategies**

like Text Talk Act that use a texting platform to send discussion and polling questions to participants.

♦ **Interactive Voice Response (IVR)**

systems that allow users to dial into a number and use the touch-tone keypad to answer questions and provide feedback on given ideas. One popular option for IVR is [TWILIO](#), which is commonly used by companies to configure their call centers.



During President Obama's National Dialogue on Mental Health, a coalition of nonprofit organizations and the federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) engaged over 50,000 people, many of them young people, in text-enabled deliberation on mental health issues. Evaluations showed that participants learned about mental health, became more likely to reach out to others to seek help, and became better able to identify when friends or family members were experiencing mental health problems. The preferences recorded by the participants helped shape the next two years of funding decisions made by SAMHSA.

d) Official Public Meetings

The engagement strategies described in 3a-c have been used many times as part of temporary initiatives, but they have rarely been incorporated in the [official public meetings](#) of city councils, school boards, planning commissions, state agencies, and other decision-making bodies. The vast majority of those official meetings continue to use the same format they have for decades: participants are allowed three minutes at the microphone to address the officials, on any topic they choose, with almost no interaction between citizens, officials, or staff. These meetings produce frustration on the part of both citizens and officials and seem to erode public trust in government.

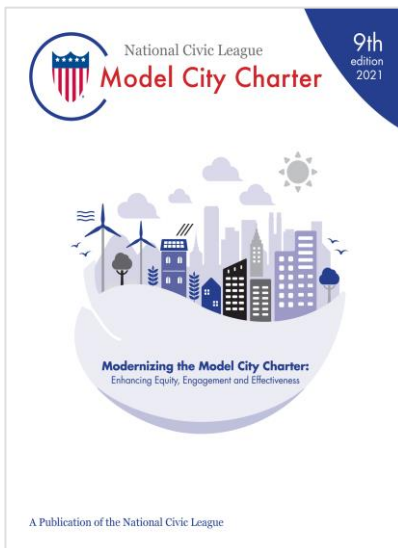
Considerations in improving public meetings:

♦ [Open meetings laws](#) often seem like an impediment to innovation, but in most states they do allow positive changes in the format of public meetings.

♦ Simply changing the format of meetings may not be sufficient; officials should engage residents before and after meetings, online and off, in ways that gather productive input and encourage more people to attend the meetings.

♦ Giving people a chance to rate the meetings can help communities measure progress as they make improvements and may help encourage change (see example on p. 3).

♦ Updating the laws and ordinances that govern public meetings, using templates like the Model City Charter (see below), can provide a stronger legal framework for civic health.



The [Model City Charter](#) has been maintained by the National Civic League since 1902. The most recent edition, issued in 2021, is the first to uphold equity and engagement as core priorities of local government.

generate durable power for an organization representing the community, allowing it to influence key decision-makers on a range of issues over time.

Common organizing strategies include:

- ♦ **House meetings** are structured conversations held in a safe space where participants talk about the challenges they are facing, the values they share, and how they can work together to achieve the changes they seek.
- ♦ **‘One-on-ones’** are interviews in which an organizer talks with a resident to find out what motivates them, what interests they share with others, and what they might bring to a group effort.

e) Community-Based Organizing Strategies

“Community organizing” is an umbrella term describing a whole family of nonpartisan strategies and processes. People who live near each other or share some common problem join together in an organization that acts in their shared self-interest. Community organizers generally assume that social change necessarily involves conflict and social struggle in order to generate collective power for the powerless. One of the core goals of most community organizing approaches is to



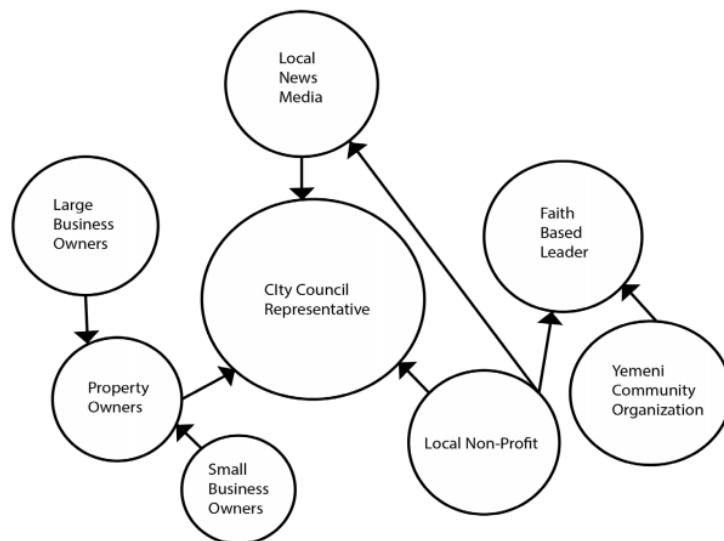
A house meeting in Arizona



One-on-one interviews conducted by the [Bay Area Industrial Areas Foundation](#)

- ♦ **Power mapping** is a process in which people work out who holds power on a particular issue and who has the authority to make the change that residents seek (see example below).

♦ **“Asset-based community development”** is related to community organizing; it is a philosophy and process that encourages people to name the positive assets they and their community possess, building from those rather than focusing on their deficits.



Example of a power and proximity map (created by Nicole Cabral, edited by Jennifer Orellana).

The George Wiley Center has worked for four decades to organize, mobilize, and empower members of the low-income community in Rhode Island to affect change and address challenges associated with poverty.



Fuerza Laboral is a worker-owned cooperative incubator that trains, educates, and organizes individuals to become community leaders, advocates for fair wages and improved work conditions, and builds worker-owned cooperatives.

SISTA Fire seeks to “support and nurture women and nonbinary people of color to come together and build our collective power for social, economic and political transformation.”



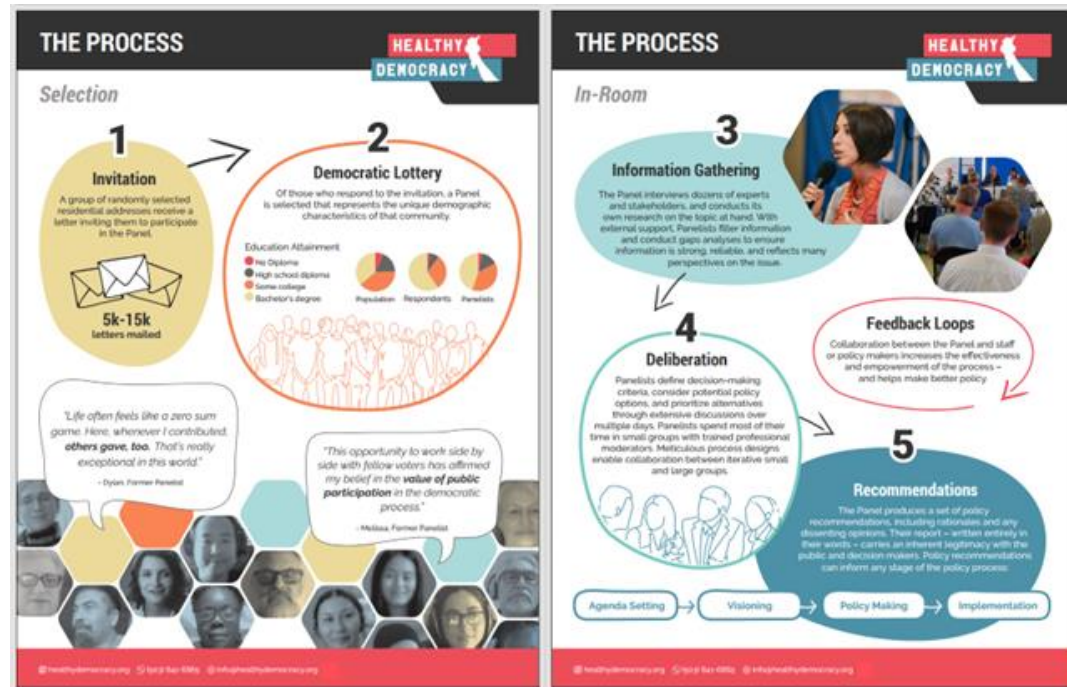
f) Citizens' Assemblies

Citizens' assemblies are a type of direct citizen engagement where a randomly selected, demographically representative group of people comes together to learn about, deliberate on, and make recommendations about an important public issue. Typically, these groups range from 30-100 people, and they are carefully assembled to represent the community in terms of age, gender, race, language, place of residence, socio-economic factors, political affiliation, and other demographics. Citizen juries, civic lotteries, and the Citizen's Initiative Review in Oregon are similar 'sortition-based' or 'civic lottery' (meaning random and representative) processes. This is one of the 'thickest' forms of engagement (see p. 6) and works best when supported by thinner forms that allow much larger numbers of people to learn about, give input to, and follow the recommendations of the assembly.

More about citizens' assemblies:

- ♦ In most cases, a government body (a city council or a state legislature, for example) calls for and supports the citizens' assembly.

- ♦ The process typically lasts at least four days and can be more than 20 (spaced out over several weeks or months).



Main ingredients of a sortition-based deliberative process, from [Healthy Democracy](#).

- ♦ Participants hear balanced testimony on the issue from issue experts and those with lived experience and can also conduct surveys or seek comments from other citizens.



Steps in a democratic lottery system to determine who will participate in a citizens' assembly, from the Federation for Innovations in Democracy in Europe. [FIDE North America](#) advocates for, provides technical guidance to, and conducts evaluations of citizens' assemblies in North America.

- ♦ Sortition-based processes can be paired with survey panels (see pp. 9-10), which can be helpful in both achieving



The Oregon Citizens' Initiative Review is a process in which a citizens' jury deliberates about a ballot initiative and assesses the pros and cons of the measure; the jury's findings are included in the Oregon voter pamphlet that is mailed to every household in the state.

the representative sample needed for the assembly and connecting the assembly's work with a larger number of people.

- ♦ Participants produce a final report along with actionable and well-justified proposals. The final report is presented to the mandating government body which commits to following up with the citizens' assembly within a reasonable time frame.

g) Participatory Budgeting

Participatory budgeting (PB) is a democratic process in which community members decide how to spend part of a public budget. Citizens generate and refine ideas for how to spend the funds, often working in teams that connect with experts and staff, and then there is a vote where everyone in the community can prioritize

the ideas and allocate the money. PB was originally a face-to-face process but has also been conducted online or as a hybrid strategy.

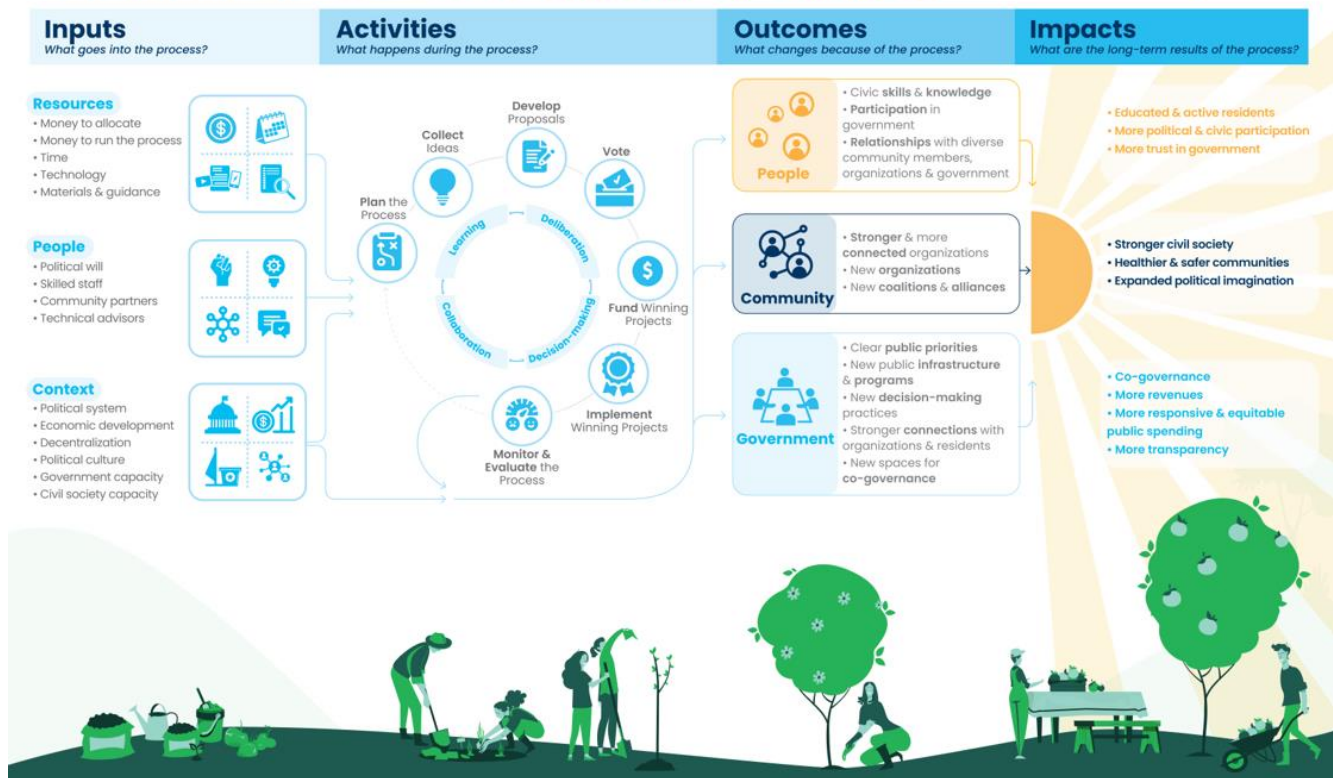
More about participatory budgeting:

- ♦ PB was invented in Brazil in 1989 and there have since been almost 12,000 PB processes in [over 3,000 cities on six continents](#).
- ♦ Over 700,000 people have participated in PB in the U.S. and Canada.
- ♦ Some PB processes are focused on neighborhoods or city wards, while others (particularly in Latin America) have a second tier in which neighborhood participants are selected to serve in a metro-wide process to advise the overall city budget.



The Rhode Island Department of Health, in partnership with the Executive Office of Health and Human Services, allocated federal funding to Health Equity Zones (HEZ) to establish a participatory budgeting pilot project. Through this effort, residents in Central Falls have used PB to allocate public funds to improve education and health opportunities for community members. One of the resulting projects was the renovation of a school cafeteria (pictured above).

PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING THEORY OF CHANGE



A theory of change for participatory budgeting, developed by members of the Global PB Research and Practitioner Boards.

♦ In many cases, participatory budgeting has been shown to reduce inequality, improve public health, reduce corruption, and increase trust.

h) Social Engagement

Some forms of engagement are successful and sustainable because people find them convenient and fun. [ON THE TABLE](#), an



On the Table was initiated by the Chicago Community Trust; 74% of participants said the experience helped them "understand public issues better," and 53% said they would "take action on an idea they discussed."

initiative in Chicago which brought people together to discuss public issues over dinner, engaged over 55,000 people and expanded to ten other cities before the Covid-19 pandemic interrupted the work. (This model inspired the Rhode Island Foundation's Together RI initiative – see below). The City of Decatur, Georgia, hosts a variety of social events, including "[TOUCH THE BUDGET](#)" (featuring fire trucks and

"Sometimes you need a meeting that is also a party, and sometimes you need a party that is also a meeting."

-Gloria Rubio-Cortes, former President, National Civic League

other city vehicles), to explain the city budget and get input on budget options.

[CREATE BUCKHANNON](#), a community organization in Buckhannon, West Virginia, has held a weekly lunch almost every Thursday since 2009. The group has helped citizens plan and establish a new farmer's market and new bike trails.

Common ingredients:

- ♦ A simple format for discussion over a meal (in some cases, participants get their choice of topics and pick a table based on what they want to discuss; in others, everyone gets the same set of discussion questions on the same topic).
- ♦ Locations and an atmosphere that make it comfortable for people to bring their kids.
- ♦ Events that recur – some of the more successful examples are weekly – so that

people know what to expect and participation grows over time.

- ♦ Intentional efforts to recruit a wide variety of people to participate.



The Jane Addams School for Democracy, a partnership between the University of Minnesota and the Westside neighborhood of St. Paul, involved 50-200 people every month in “neighborhood learning circles” and cultural exchanges, in four languages, over a period of almost twenty years.



Beginning in 2018, Rhode Island Foundation has hosted a series of neighborly get-togethers called Together RI. These gatherings have created opportunities for community members to be heard, to listen, to reconnect, and to promote civic and civil dialogue. These free events are open to the public and held throughout the state to help ensure different communities can participate. Forty have been held to date.



[Operation Stand Down RI](#) uses a variety of approaches, including meals, ceremonies, and canvassing, to reach veterans living in the state with basic services, volunteering opportunities, legal assistance, and job training programs.

SECTION 4

Reaching Diverse Audiences

Recruitment and communication strategies for reaching large, diverse numbers of people

Perhaps the most fundamental skill in strengthening civic health is recruitment: proactively reaching out to large numbers of people to attract them to the events, platforms, surveys, and other activities that will help them make decisions, solve problems, and build community. This is particularly important for bringing people to the table whose voices, for one reason or another, simply aren't being heard. "[Going where the people are](#)," and holding discussions in the places where they already gather (online spaces as well as in-person ones), is often an excellent step in this direction, but even

that isn't always sufficient. People participate in things because they are asked to do so by someone they know and trust, and so the key to recruitment is tapping into that web of existing, trusting relationships in the community.

Recruitment Strategies	
	Stakeholder Mapping
	Timeline Exercise
	Goal Setting
	Digital Tools

Strategies for recruitment to build civic health include:

Stakeholder Mapping

Conducting a stakeholder mapping exercise, or ‘tree exercise,’ to show which people and organizations are trusted by which groups and populations in the community (see example, right).

Timeline Exercise

There are often good reasons why people haven’t gotten involved in the past – a timeline exercise (see p. 5) can help uncover past incidents, divisions, or unsuccessful engagement efforts that help explain why people don’t want to participate.

Goal Setting

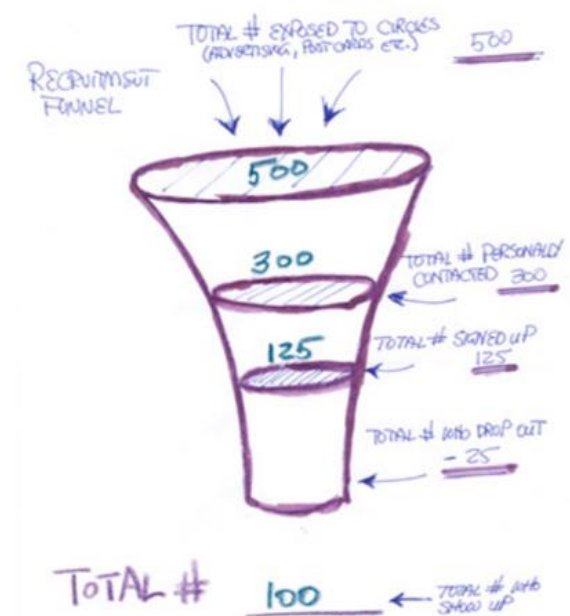
Set goals for how many people you are trying to attract, and which sets of people are important but may be particularly difficult to recruit (see funnel graphic, right).

Digital Tools

Digital tools that help manage relational organizing have been used extensively on political campaigns – they can also be useful for outreach around civic activities.



Stakeholder tree created by RiseBoro Community Partnership in Brooklyn, New York.



“Recruitment funnel” created by Jon Abercrombie of Common Focus in Decatur, Georgia.



The Tomaquag Museum and its Indigenous Empowerment Center aim to educate people through engagement and shared dialogue to “reconcile the past and empower present and future generations.”

SECTION 5

Arts-Based Strategies

Arts-based strategies for strengthening civic health through shared experience, connection, education, and understanding

The arts can be a catalyst for helping people understand each other, learn about their history, solve public problems, and address trauma and division. These are all ways to strengthen civic health. Plus, visual, performing, and culinary arts all serve the basic function of bringing people together and building community.



The RI Latino Artists Network is an initiative of RI Latino Arts that promotes the richness, beauty, and diversity of Latin American cultures. Their meet ups provide networking opportunities to stimulate artistic activities and cultural interaction.



Some arts-based strategies can be particularly valuable to civic health:

♦ Initiatives that use the arts as a focal point for networking and interaction, such as the meet ups held

by the [RHODE ISLAND LATINO](#)

[ARTISTS NETWORK](#) (logo, left)

or the events hosted by the

[TOMAQUAG MUSEUM](#) (pictured above).

Arts programs work well with:



Networking



Technology

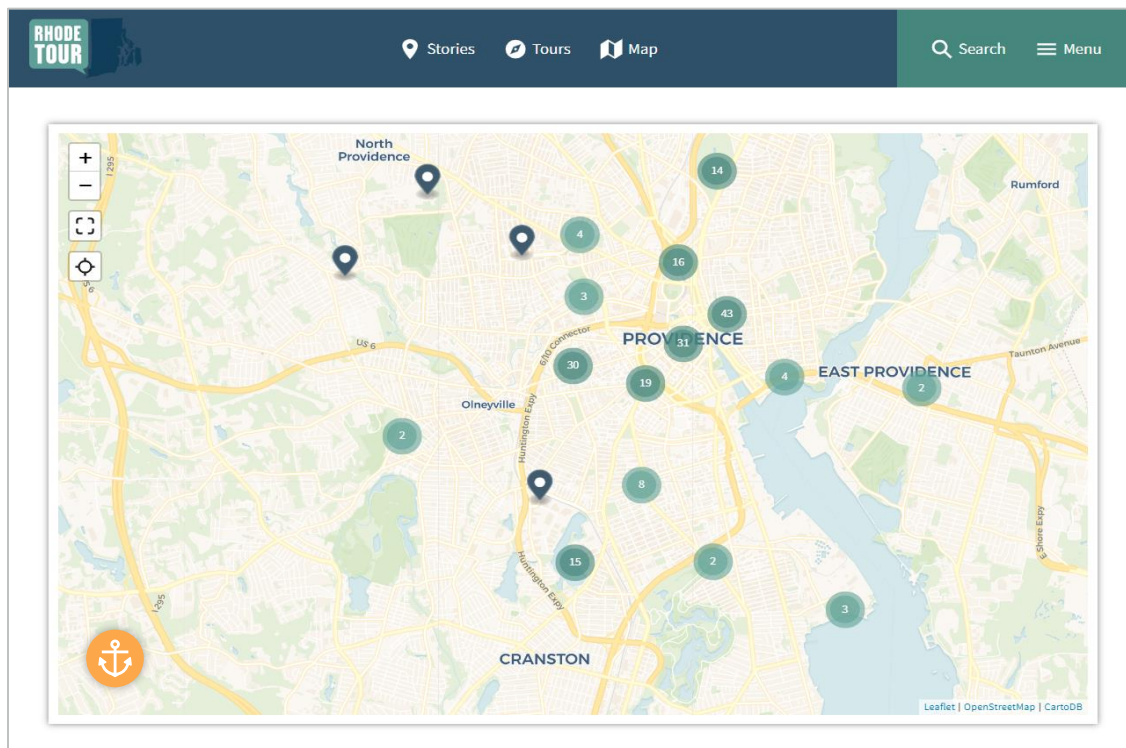


Participation



= Rhode Island Example

- ♦ Programs that use technology to make culture, history, and the arts more interactive and accessible, such as [RHODE TOUR](#) (below).



Rhode Tour is a smartphone app and website that uses text, sound, and images to share Rhode Island stories. The Rhode Tour map is a joint initiative of the [Rhode Island Council for the Humanities](#), Brown University's [John Nicholas Brown Center for Public Humanities and Cultural Heritage](#), and the [Rhode Island Historical Society](#). It presents stories relevant to different locations to help you learn more about those places.

- ♦ Participatory theater programs that help people navigate conflict and work out better ways to make decisions together, such as [“CITY COUNCIL”](#) (below).

“City Council” was a participatory theater project held in Houston, Texas, Tempe, Arizona, New York City, New York, San Francisco, California, and Keene, New Hampshire, where volunteers acted out city council discussions using transcripts from actual meetings.





Students in class at the Town of Narragansett's Citizens Police Academy in 2018



SECTION 6

Citizen Academies

Citizen academies and other grassroots leadership development programs organized by local governments and other institutions

Citizen academies are training programs organized by local governments (and other institutions) that give residents a better understanding of how city councils, police departments, planning departments, and other city functions work. There are some academies focused on state government, and others that are geared toward newer immigrants and people whose first language is not English. Citizen police academies focus on law enforcement in particular. Most of these programs were interrupted by the pandemic; they can be

re-introduced and upgraded in a number of ways.

Upgrading Citizen Academies



Collaborative Curriculum



Digital Tools & Strategies



Joint Learning



Cross-Generation Participation



= Rhode Island Example

 Collaborative Curriculum

Shifting the emphasis from simply ‘how government works’ to including at least some discussion with participants about ‘how government and citizens could work together better.’

 Digital Tools & Strategies

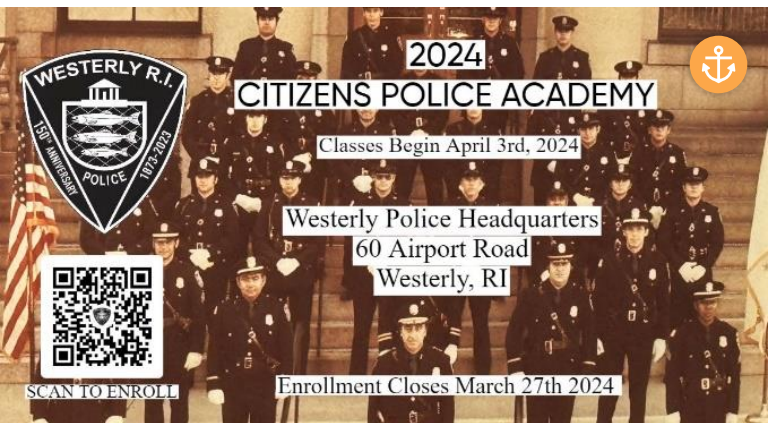
Including digital tools and strategies, particularly ones that help citizens and governments share information, gather input, and gauge citizen attitudes.

 Joint Learning

Providing opportunities for citizens and city employees to go through the training together, not just as trainers and trainees but as co-learners.

 Cross-Gen Participation

Including people of different generations in the same training program.



Advertisement for the Westerly Citizens Police Academy

 2019 Citizens Academy "There is No Petersburg Without U"			
Day/Date	Time	Location	Title of Sessions
Thursday, February 28, 2019	6:30-7:45PM	Union Train Station, 103 River Street	City Government Structure, Mayor & City Council City Functions, Budget,
Saturday, March 30, 2019	10:00-11:15AM	Union Train Station, 103 River Street	Public Safety in your City (Police, Fire and Sheriff's Office, Commonwealth Attorney)
Thursday, April 25, 2019	6:30-7:45PM	Union Train Station, 103 River Street	Meet your State and Local Representatives (Commonwealth of Virginia)
Thursday, May 23, 2019	6:30-7:45PM	Union Train Station, 103 River Street	Public Works, (Streets, Facilities, Utilities, PAT)
Saturday, June 29, 2019	10:00-11:15AM	Union Train Station, 103 River Street	Community Affairs - Region Works, Recreation/Special Events & Volunteerism & Library
Thursday, July 25, 2019	6:30-7:45PM	Union Train Station, 103 River Street	Community Affairs - Social Services & Freedom Support Center
Saturday, August 31, 2019	10:00-11:15AM	Union Train Station, 103 River Street	How to respond to a Disaster (your home, church, & your child's school).
Thursday, September 26, 2019	6:30-7:45PM	Union Train Station, 103 River Street	Meet the City of Petersburg Constitutional Officers
Thursday, October 24, 2019	6:30-7:45PM	Union Train Station, 103 River Street	Planning and Zoning
Thursday, November 21, 2019	6:30-7:45PM	Union Train Station, 103 River Street	Citizens Academy - Congratulations Ceremony
*Speakers are subject to change. For additional information, please call - 804.324.4014			

Sample citizens academy agenda from Petersburg, VA



Chicago participants in City Bureau's "Documenters" program that trains and pays citizen journalists in 11 cities

SECTION 7

Civic Media & Journalism

Civic media / public journalism projects that cover key aspects of civic life

The concepts of “civic media,” “civic journalism,” and “public journalism” are all based on the idea that reporting and journalism can strengthen civic health. Rather than focusing on partisan conflict and national personalities, [civic media](#) provides more news that people can use: different options on major policy questions, potential solutions to public problems, and ways for residents to get engaged. [Civic journalists](#) not only inform the public, they also directly engage their audiences through interactive candidate forums, processes to determine which issues to cover, training community “documenters” to cover public meetings, and other activities.

In addition to increasing the supply of good coverage and important information, many civic media efforts focus on increasing “media literacy,” which is our capacity to access, analyze, evaluate, and create media in a variety of forms—from print to video to the internet. Media literacy projects help people apply critical thinking to media messages and use media to create their own messages.





Some examples of civic media and journalism:

♦ [CITY BUREAU](#), a Chicago-based nonprofit that just won a Pulitzer Prize for local reporting, organizes a [Documenters](#) program (pictured on previous page) that trains and pays citizen journalists in 11 cities to report on city council, school board, planning commission, and other public meetings where important local decisions are being made.

♦ The [TEXAS TRIBUNE](#), a nonprofit media organization, is known for original, explanatory journalism. It has

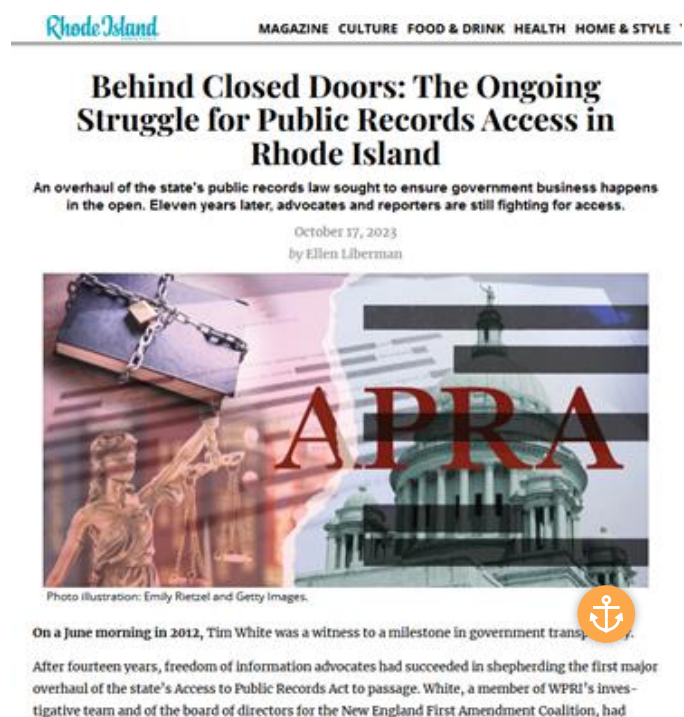
the largest newsroom covering a state capital of any media outlet anywhere in the country. The *Tribune* hosts dozens of on-the-record, livestreamed, public [events](#) where “public officials, policy experts and others talk about the work they’re doing and various issues affecting Texans,” along with an annual [TEXAS TRIBUNE FESTIVAL](#) (advertisement, above) that attracts thousands of people to Austin to “learn about Texas’ biggest challenges and to spark thoughtful discussion about solutions.”

♦ Efforts to update the laws on transparency and public records are important for both journalists and citizens. Many of the existing laws were enacted decades ago, don’t account for the internet, allow information to be redacted, and charge fees for public access to public information on key issues like budgets, transportation, and law enforcement. In Rhode Island, lawmakers are considering updates to the [Access to Public Records Act](#).

♦ The [GERMANTOWN INFO HUB](#) (image below) is a



“hyper-local newsroom doing reporting for and with residents” of Germantown, a neighborhood in Philadelphia. The Info Hub uses weekly text messages, tables at events, and other venues to invite residents to share ideas for stories and issues. “Ideas from the community are shared with community journalists and media partners and used to inform monthly community discussions.”

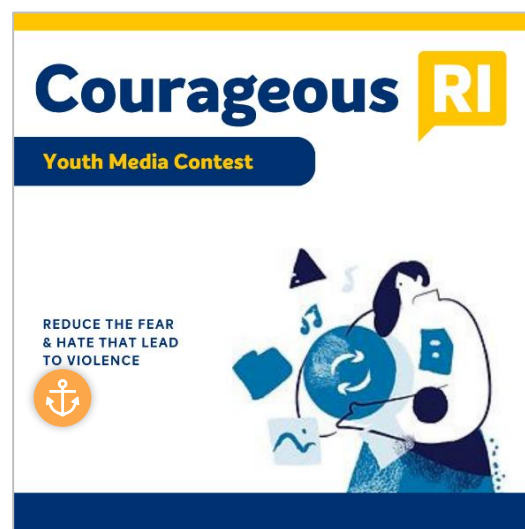


Op-ed on updating the Access to Public Records Act

- ♦ In Rhode Island, [OCEAN STATE STORIES](#) (below, left) is a media outlet from [Salve Regina University's Pell Center](#) that focuses on issues that often are neglected or under-reported. These stories “are told with data, expert input, and, importantly, the personal experiences of Rhode Islanders.”
- ♦ The [MEDIA EDUCATION LAB](#) advances media literacy education through leadership development, scholarship, and community engagement. One of their projects, [Courageous RI](#) (below, right), brings people together for interactive information and conversation to counter disinformation and prevent violence.



Sample screenshot from Ocean State Stories homepage



Ad for Courageous RI's Youth Media Contest



The [West Broadway Neighborhood Association](#) is one of the many neighborhood groups active in Providence

SECTION 8

Grassroots Civic Groups

Community-based civic groups and strategies for supporting them

Every community has a “ground floor of democracy”: neighborhood and homeowner associations, parent associations and other school- or university-based groups, service clubs, boards and commissions, and other grassroots groups. These kinds of groups have the potential to offer highly accessible, meaningful civic opportunities to a wide range of people. In some cases they are reaching this potential, but in other instances, grassroots civic groups need more skills and support to engage, sustain, and grow their memberships. Citizens also need help starting up more of these groups; according to a recent report

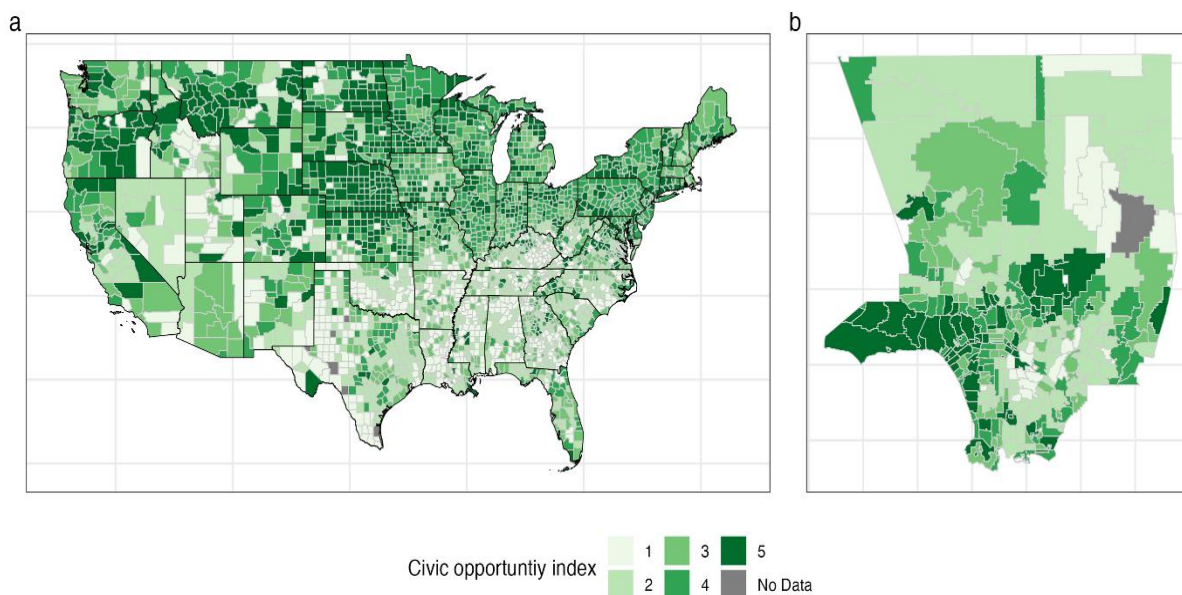
(see next page), communities that need them most often lack critical civic opportunities.

Grassroots civic groups can benefit from:

- ♦ Workshops and trainings that focus on:
 - » Strategies and tools for outreach, recruitment, and relational organizing (see [Section 4](#));
 - » Design and facilitation of in-person or [virtual meetings](#) (see [Section 3c](#));
 - » Strategies and tools for live polling and decision-making (including digital tools such as [Mentimeter](#));



= Rhode Island Example



Maps of the continental United States and Los Angeles County from [The Unequal Landscape of Civic Opportunity in America](#) ranked by county and zip code, respectively, according to civic opportunity score. A score of 5 indicates high civic opportunity, meaning it is easy for people to find organizations that offer membership, volunteering opportunities, host public events, and engage in public and civic actions. Conversely, a score of 1 indicates low civic opportunity.

- » How to incorporate food, games, music, sports, and theater (see [Sections 3h, 4](#)).
- ♦ Bringing people who belong to local online networks (see [Section 9](#)) together for in-person events, and encouraging in-person event participants to join local digital networks.
- ♦ Mini-grant programs that provide financial support for neighborhood projects (see Fremont Troll, right). The Rhode Island Foundation has offered a [Community Grants](#) program that has supported initiatives such as Good Neighbors in East Providence, providing funding to support monthly community service activities.
- ♦ Strategies and tools for measuring participant satisfaction (see [Section 3b](#)).

- ♦ Stronger ties with public institutions, such as local governments and school systems, and clearer expectations about the roles that grassroots groups can play in public decision-making. Elected



The Fremont Street Troll in Seattle, Washington, was created when a group of neighborhood residents received a mini-grant from the city for a project that would improve public safety. The mini-grant was used for the materials, while volunteers created the sculpture. The troll is located under a freeway overpass that was previously a dark and dangerous location; it is now a tourist attraction.

officials and staff are often unsure how well the grassroots group represents their neighborhood or constituency, partly because the engagement efforts aren't extensive or apparent – meanwhile,

grassroots group leaders and members are often unsure whether and how their input is being incorporated in decisions. This lack of clarity and trust leads to frustration on both sides.





Illustration by Jarad
Greene from an
[article](#) about
Vermont-based
[Front Porch Forum](#)

SECTION 9

Local Online Networks

Local and neighborhood online networks and strategies for tapping their full potential

Local and neighborhood online networks are already an important asset for civic health, and they have a great deal more untapped potential. Most American households belong to an online network that focuses on where they live: either an email list, a Facebook group page, a Nextdoor neighborhood, or some other customized platform.

These online spaces combine the convenience and scalability of a digital tool with the many benefits of face-to-face relationships (see ‘thick’ and ‘thin’ on pp. 6-7). Many local online networks function

mainly as webs for information-sharing (“does anyone know a good plumber?,” “when is the school board meeting?,” “has anyone seen my lost cat?”), and some have been criticized for enabling racial profiling

Plug into your neighborhood



Find local collaborators

Connect with your neighbors over ideas and projects.
not just complaints

Graphic from the Common Agency homepage

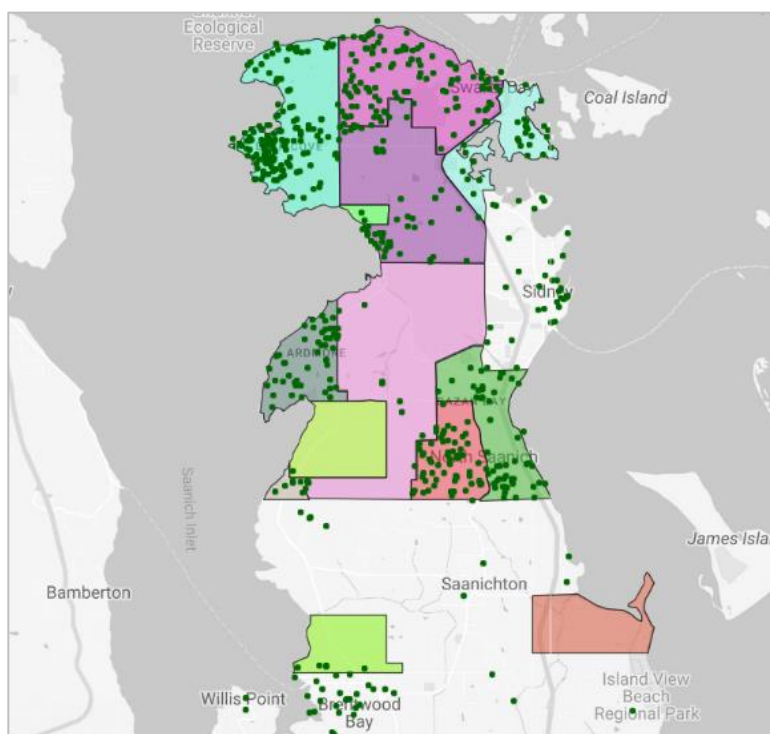


= Rhode Island Example

(when residents report people on their street as ‘suspicious’ when they simply look different from other residents).

One of the key differences between different online networks is how they are moderated. Front Porch Forum in Vermont (see previous page), which has almost 200,000 users in the state, prides itself on having trained human moderators rather than unmoderated or technologically moderated discussion threads.

A few organizations focused on supporting these networks, such as [PLACESPEAK](#) (sample map, above right) and [COMMON AGENCY](#) (graphic above), are trying to overcome the challenges and help residents reach a next level of engagement by layering in-person activities onto the online connections. These experiments seem promising because the local online networks already have what most civic health efforts need: large numbers of participants.



The PlaceSpeak map for North Saanich, British Columbia, with each dot showing a participating household. Place Speak is designed not only to support connections between residents, but to engage them in public decisions made by governments and other institutions.

Helping Neighbors Connect

Front Porch Forum is a free community-building service in Vermont and parts of New York. Your neighborhood's forum is only open to the people who live there. It's all about helping neighbors connect. [Invite neighbors and others to join.](#)

Join the conversation

How will you use this account?

[Neighbor](#) [Business](#) [Nonprofit](#) [Government](#)

Personal account, just for me

House no. Street name (no house number) Apt.

City

State/province

[Sign Up](#) or [Log In](#)

Screenshot of the sign-up page for [Front Porch Forum](#)



Members of the Student Civic Liaison Program, a new initiative of Rhode Island’s Secretary of State

SECTION 10

Civic Education & Youth Leadership

Projects and strategies for supporting civic education and youth civic leadership

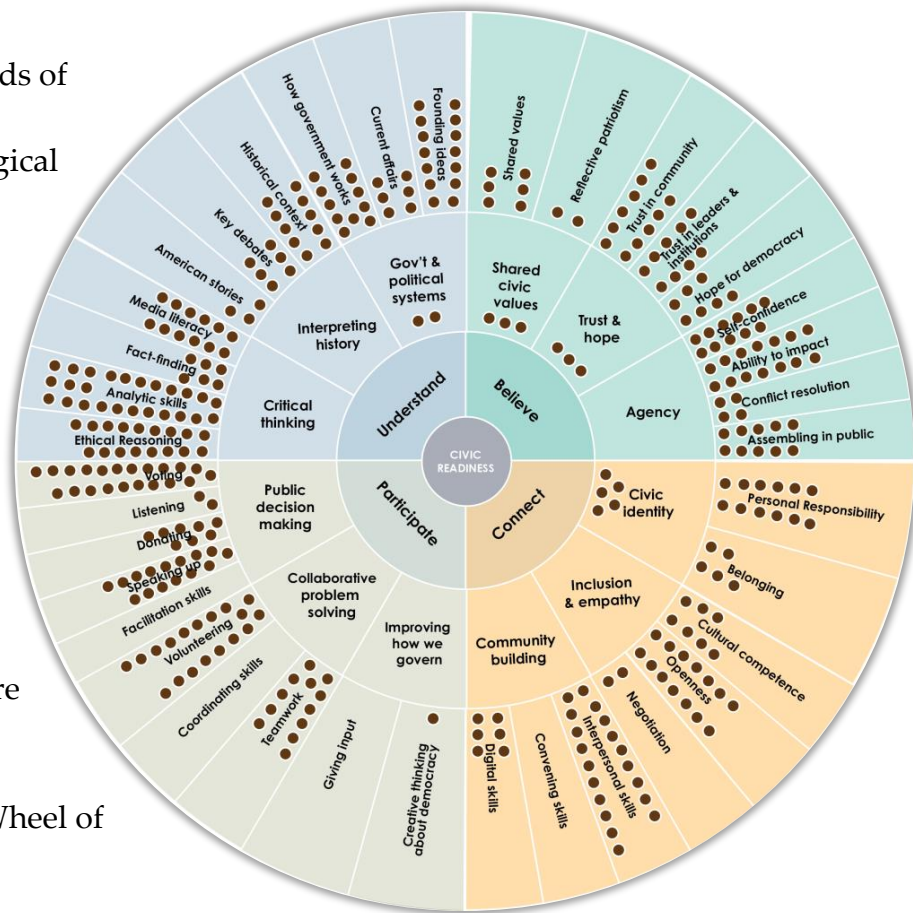
In many places, educators and officials are reinforcing the need to expand civic education and support civic learning. A wide variety of projects, organized by schools, universities, nonprofit organizations, and elected officials, aim to give young people the knowledge and skills they need to be productive citizens and leaders. Some of these efforts focus on increasing students’ understanding of our government and political systems, others involve young people in assessing and solving local problems, and many more provide opportunities for service and volunteerism (see the table of “promising practices,” right).

Table from *The Republic is (Still) at Risk – and Civics is Part of the Solution* by Peter Levine and Kei Kawashima-Ginsberg

Promising Practices for Civic Learning
1. Classroom instruction in civics, government, history, law, economics, and geography
2. Discussion of current events
3. Service learning
4. Extracurricular activities
5. Student participation in school governance
6. Simulations of democratic processes and procedures
7. News media literacy
8. Action civics
9. Social-emotional learning (SEL)
10. School climate reform

Some of the challenges that civic educators (and young people themselves) grapple with include:

- ♦ The need to better define what kinds of knowledge and skills today's citizens require, especially given the technological and societal changes we face, so that civic education opportunities can adequately prepare people.
- ♦ A comparative lack of opportunities for people to practice the skills and use the knowledge they gain through civic education (see Wheel of Civic Opportunities graphic, p. 3).
- ♦ The need for more ways to measure progress – both of individuals and communities – in gaining, using, and benefiting from civic education (see Wheel of Civic Readiness graphic, right).



The Wheel of Civic Readiness, from the [Mapping Civic Measurement](#) report by the Institute for Citizens and Scholars, shows measurement tools (each dot = a tool) for assessing people's understanding, beliefs, and skills for participation and connection.

CIVIC EDUCATION & YOUTH CIVIC LEADERSHIP IN RHODE ISLAND

Rhode Island is home to many initiatives focused on civic education and youth civic leadership. Some examples include:

- ♦ The [STUDENT CIVIC LIAISON PROGRAM](#) (pictured above, p. 32) is a new initiative of Rhode Island Secretary of State Gregg Amore and the RI Department of State, designed to create connections between local students and their government.

Students meet monthly to hear from community leaders, elected officials, and education and non-profit professionals.

- ♦ [RHODE ISLAND CIVIC LEARNING COALITION](#)'s annual [CIVIC LEARNING WEEK](#) showcases civic learning inside and outside of the classroom, bringing together students, educators, policymakers, and community leaders

across the state. The Coalition is “a growing nonpartisan group of youth, community organizations, educators, universities, and other partners committed to preparing all students to become more civically aware and involved.”



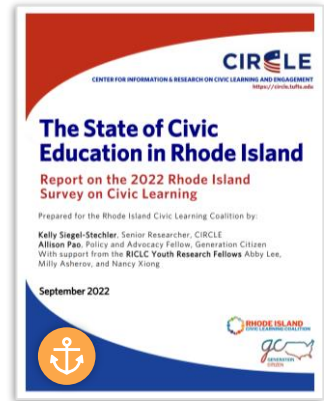
A flyer for Rhode Island Civic Learning Week in 2024

♦ The [STATE OF CIVIC EDUCATION IN RHODE ISLAND](#) report (cover at right) describes how school districts can make civic learning a priority. It covers the training and resources teachers need, reaffirms how important civic opportunities are for students, and highlights the need to

address inequities in how civic education is delivered.

♦ [GENERATION](#)

[CITIZEN](#) is a national organization that was founded by students at Brown University when they began teaching civics in classrooms in Providence. The organization has a strong Rhode Island presence and hosts an annual Civics Day at the Rhode Island State House where students get to showcase Action Civics projects to the community.



♦ [YOUNG VOICES](#) (image below) is an organization focused on empowering youth in Rhode Island. Through programming, young people are coached



on policy analysis, public speaking, and community organizing, and receive other supports to help become effective advocates in their community.

♦ ARISE, or Alliance of Rhode Island Southeast Asians for Education, supports youth of color through a variety of programs, combining leadership training and community organizing to help advocate for education justice.

ARISE and other student leaders working on a campaign to advocate for and design an ethnic studies curriculum.





The [Let RI Vote Campaign](#), a project of Rhode Island Voting Access Coalition, is working toward same-day registration for RI voters



SECTION 11

Nonpartisan Voter Engagement & Support

Supporting voters by protecting voting rights, safeguarding elections, educating about the voting process, and informing the electorate

Voting and civic health go together: when people are better connected to their communities, they are more likely to vote, and when they vote they are performing a central civic duty.

Many organizations and government agencies are working to protect voter rights, uphold free and fair elections, help people understand how to register and when to vote, and provide people with information on issues and candidates so that they can vote more confidently.

The need for these kinds of supports is high: across the country, roughly [50 percent](#)

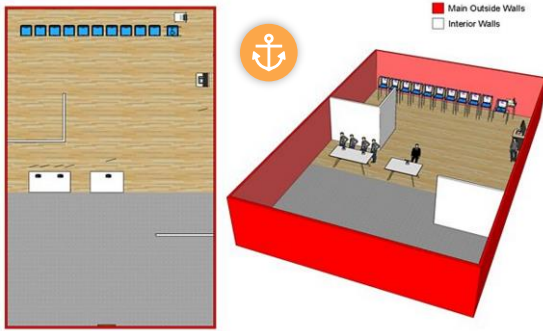
of all the people who register never actually vote, and closer to 75 percent of those registered don't vote in primaries and local elections.

Nonpartisan Supports for Voters

-  Information Sharing Tools
-  Voter Education
-  GOTV Campaigns
-  Electoral Reform
-  Election Worker Protection

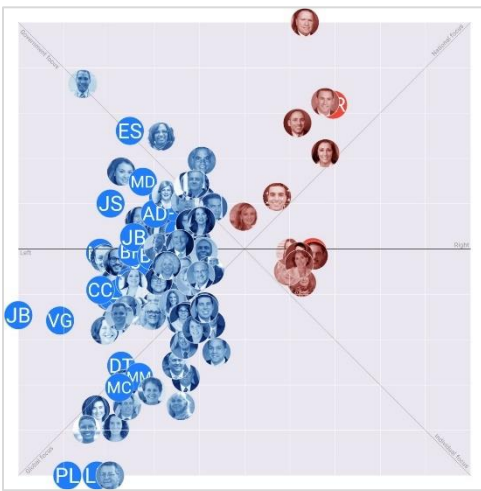
Nonpartisan supports for voting include:

- ♦ **Voter information tools** such as [TURBOVOTE](#) and [VOTE411](#), that let people know how to register, where to vote, when primaries and elections are being held, and how to vote by mail.



[URI Votes](#) encourages voter turnout by providing tools and research – like this polling layout diagram – that limit waiting times at polling locations. They help election administrators and officials overcome current and future obstacles to voting.

- ♦ **Voter education tools** like [ActiVote](#) (see below) that help people compare their policy views with those of candidates, understand ballot initiatives and referenda, and advance their knowledge through games and other activities.

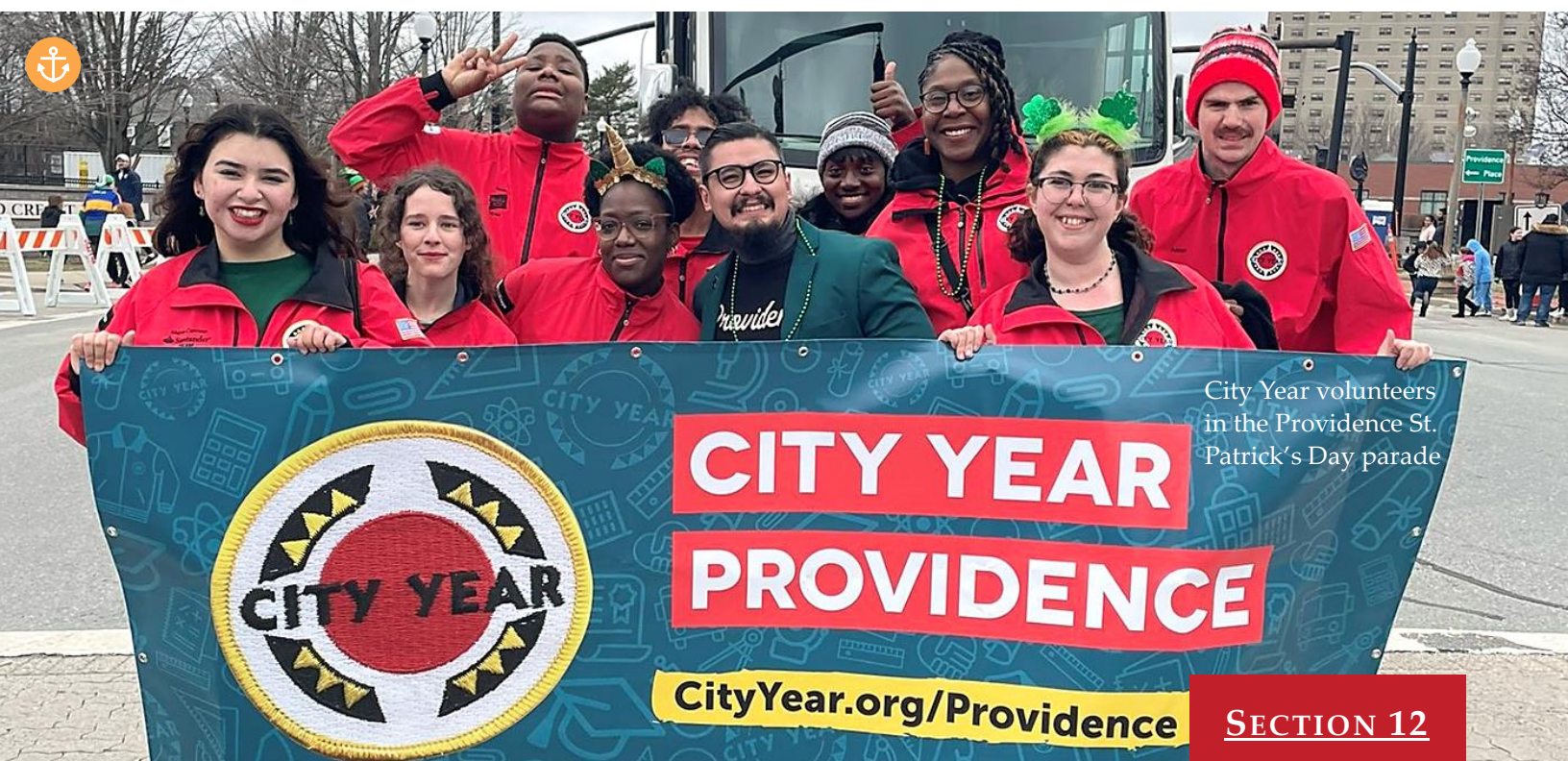


A graphic from [ActiVote](#) charting the policy views of all members of the Rhode Island Legislature. ActiVote is a nonpartisan civic tech platform created with voters at the center of the design. It is the nation's largest and fastest-growing voter education tool, and the only one to provide in-depth information on how users' policy preferences match up with those of the candidates in the local, state, and national races in which they can cast a ballot.

- ♦ **Get out the vote campaigns**, some using relational organizing (see [Section 4](#)), that encourage people to vote.
- ♦ **Measures to protect election workers** and support them in their work.
- ♦ **Electoral reforms** that safeguard elections, make voting clearer and simpler, and try to ensure that the will of voters is evident in election results. The [LET RI VOTE CAMPAIGN](#) (pictured above, p. 36), a project of the Rhode Island Voting Access Coalition, is working toward electoral reforms that would allow same-day registration for voters in the state. The coalition is a collection of community groups and other organizations working to advance the cause of voting rights in Rhode Island.



As an affiliate of the national, nonpartisan political organization established in 1920, the [League of Women Voters of Rhode Island](#) provides a number of resources and tools for informing and supporting voters.



City Year volunteers
in the Providence St.
Patrick's Day parade

Service & Volunteerism

Methods to support, improve, and promote service opportunities, programming, and impact

Service is fundamental to civic health. Thousands of organizations provide volunteering opportunities, helping people improve their communities, support young people, and assist those in need. Many service programs focus on teenagers and young adults, while others encourage volunteerism by mid-career adults and senior citizens (see examples on the following page).

A number of innovations have been proposed or implemented to improve service and its impact, including:

- ♦ Connecting service programs with other civic opportunities and nonprofit groups, to better direct volunteer efforts to the places and situations where they are needed, and providing service fellowships that match mid-career volunteers with organizations that could best use their help.



City Year Providence (image, above) focuses on creating equitable learning opportunities and developing the city's future leaders. They are working in five schools with 33 team members for the 2023-2024 school year, focused on three goals: ensuring more Providence students are on track to high school graduation; advancing

interpersonal and workforce readiness skills; and partnering with teachers and principals.

♦ Maximizing the educational potential of service by applying the principles and practices of “service learning.” Service learning encourages critical thinking and personal reflection on volunteer experiences, and helps people get better at analyzing and solving public problems.

♦ Emphasizing service as a vehicle for workforce development, and offering volunteer opportunities that give people job skills, expose them to new career paths, and help them make connections with potential employers.

♦ Providing incentives to volunteers, such as scholarships for higher education or a grant that helps the volunteer start a business or buy a first home.

♦ Making service mandatory for high school students.



Developing & Managing Volunteer Programs graphic from the [Management Library](#).



The [Leadership Rhode Island Senior Fellows Program](#), in partnership with [Age-Friendly Rhode Island](#), is an 8-week summer program geared to lifting the voices, knowledge, and vision of Rhode Island residents 62 and older.



A panel during the “[Demystifying Democracy](#)” event series led by the Latino Policy Institute and Common Cause Rhode Island.



SECTION 13

Research & Advocacy Groups

Policy research and advocacy organizations who inform the public and facilitate interactions between citizens and elected officials

Civic health is stronger when people understand the laws and public policy options that elected officials are considering, and when people know how to share their policy preferences with their elected representatives. A wide range of organizations are involved in policy research, elected official and stakeholder engagement, and public awareness and advocacy campaigns.

Many of those organizations also educate residents about the legislative process and mobilize them so they may be effective advocates in their communities. This

category therefore overlaps to some extent with civic education and all of the work represented in [Section 3: Directly Engaging Citizens](#).

Examples include:

♦ [PARENTS LEADING FOR EDUCATIONAL EQUITY](#) (PLEE) is a grassroots organization that was founded and is led by parents. The group serves the urban core communities of Providence, Pawtucket, and Central Falls, using the voices of families to advocate for policies to improve outcomes for students.



♦ The [LATINO POLICY INSTITUTE OF RHODE ISLAND](#) (LPI) is a statewide research service organization focused on building the capacity of the growing Latino population in the state. It works to stimulate public policy discourse by examining and communicating the evolving experiences of the Latino community.



LPI collaborated with other groups in 2023 to support multicultural professionals in the mental and behavioral health workforce.

♦ Common Cause is a national, nonpartisan nonprofit advocacy organization with state chapters, including [COMMON CAUSE RHODE ISLAND](#). [DEMYSTIFYING DEMOCRACY](#) (image above, right), one of their current programs, “helps Rhode Islanders get a start on becoming strong advocates in our democracy.”

STANDING COMMITTEES & HEARING ROOMS

House Committees

- House Corporations: Room 203
- Environment & Natural Resources: Rooms 205 & 101
- Finance: Room 35 (not pictured)
- Health, Education & Welfare: Rooms 135 & 101
- Judiciary: Rooms 205 & 101
- Labor: House Lounge & Room 212
- Municipal Government: Room 203
- Oversight: Room 101
- Rules: Room 135
- Small Business: Rooms 101 & 135
- Veterans' Affairs: Room 135

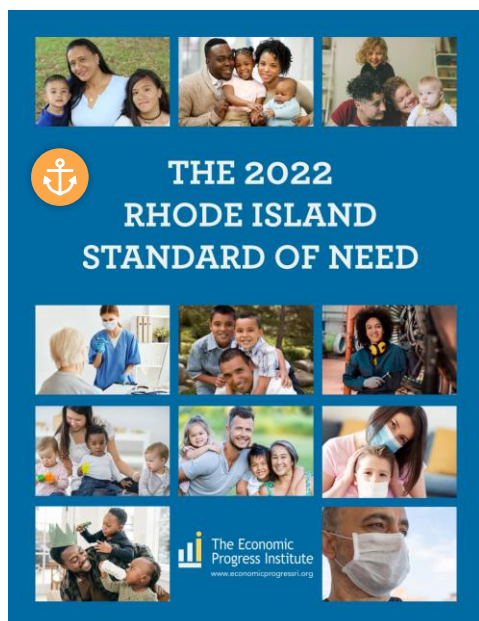
Senate Committees

- Commerce: Senate Lounge & Room 212
- Education: Room 313
- Environment & Agriculture: Senate Lounge & Room 211
- Finance: Senate Lounge & Room 211
- Government Oversight: Senate Lounge
- Health & Human Services: Lounge, Rooms 211 & 212
- Housing & Municipal Government: Senate Lounge
- Judiciary: Room 313
- Labor: Room 212
- Rules: Room 310
- Special Legislation & Veterans' Affairs: Room 310

Always check committee agenda for location of hearing

commoncauseri.org | facebook.com/CommonCauseRI | twitter.com/CommonCauseRI

Map of Rhode Island State House standing committees and hearing rooms produced by Common Cause Rhode Island as part of their Demystifying Democracy series



♦ The [ECONOMIC PROGRESS INSTITUTE](#) advocates for policies that improve economic security and opportunity for Rhode Islanders. They publish the [RHODE ISLAND STANDARD OF NEED](#) report (left) every other year to answer two fundamental questions about the economic security or insecurity of Rhode Islanders: 1) What is the cost of meeting basic needs for families and individuals in Rhode Island?, and 2) How do state and federal work supports help households meet the cost of basic needs?

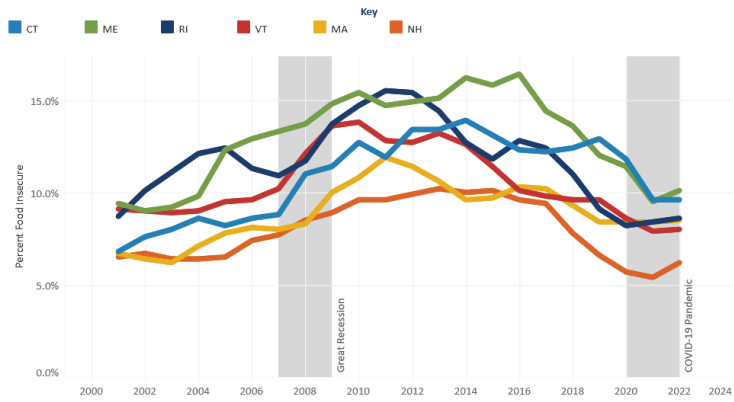
Cover of EPI's 2022 Rhode Island Standard of Need report.

♦ The [RHODE ISLAND FOOD POLICY COUNCIL](#) coordinates with people and entities who make up the state’s food system. Through education, programming, outreach, and community engagement, they raise awareness and advocate for policies that support a thriving food system.



Who We Are ▾ Our Work ▾ Resources ▾ **Data Dashboard ▾** News Feed ▾ Get Involved ▾ Contact

FOOD SECURITY IN NEW ENGLAND



Food insecurity is defined by the USDA as the lack of consistent access to enough food for a healthy and active life. Food insecurity is rooted in poverty and economic upheaval. Rhode Island’s rate of food insecurity was the highest in New England in the early 2000s. It then decreased before spiking due to the Great Recession (December 2007-June 2009). The prevalence of food insecurity in Rhode Island did not decrease until after 2012. The COVID pandemic then sharply increased food insecurity in the region. Note that USDA estimates for states represent 3-year averages (e.g., 2019-2021, 2020-2022).

Data sources: Matthew P. Rabbit, Laura J. Hales, Michael P. Burke and Alisha Coleman-Jensen, 2022, [Household Food Security in the United States in 2022](#), ERR-325, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service.



Part of the Data Dashboard produced by the Rhode Island Food Policy Council.





SECTION 14

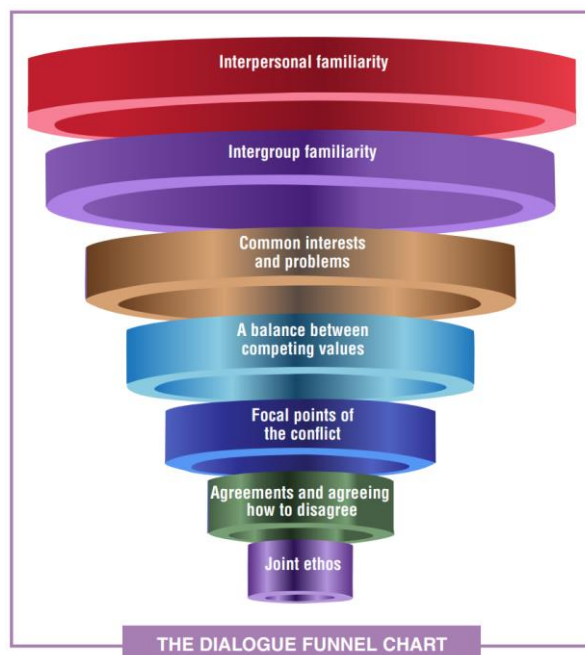
Increasing Equity

Strategies for increasing equity in civic health, and important factors to consider in the process

Though researchers are just [beginning to explore](#) the connections between equity and civic health, it seems likely that when institutions establish better two-way relationships and higher levels of trust with groups of people who have been marginalized, this has positive impacts on the civic health of both the marginalized populations and the community as a whole.

Furthermore, because civic health increases our quality of life – including safety, wealth, physical health, and other indicators – it is important that those benefits are shared

Chart from Kettering Foundation's 2022 [Connections](#) report showing a program model for using dialogue to address long-standing conflicts and inequities.



= Rhode Island Example

“Work in support of democracy in the 21st century has to confront the realities of inequality in our systems... extreme levels of inequality in our community are often cited as one of the major threats to democracy. Democracy should mean, at minimum, that we have a system that is providing shared opportunities for self-actualization of all our citizens.”

- Sharon Davies, President,
Kettering Foundation

by everyone. Just like everyone should have good opportunities to get an education or get a job, civic opportunities should be available to all regardless of their age, gender, racial or ethnic background, income level, or where they live or work.

There are a number of important factors to consider, including:

♦ The [history of race](#), and how people of different racial backgrounds have interacted in a community, continues to affect how many people think and whether or not they get involved.

♦ People in positions of authority need to be explicit about wanting to understand and affect equity, or many community members will assume they are not interested.



The Rhode Island Police Chiefs Association issued a 2020 report and analysis, [The Twenty for 2020](#), committing to 20 promises and policy changes to combat systemic racism.

♦ Talking about equity and difference can be extremely helpful but it is rarely sufficient: people also want to see action by leaders and institutions, and they are often willing to help implement those actions and make changes in their own lives.

♦ Developing processes for gathering, sharing, and analyzing data can help illuminate whether decisions are being made in equitable ways, and whether the impacts of those decisions are equitable.



Roger Williams Park and its Temple to Music were renovated as part of a \$10 million campaign by the Rhode Island Foundation.



SECTION 15

Public Spaces

Wired, welcoming indoor and outdoor spaces for people to gather, work together, and build community

The political philosopher Hannah Arendt is said to have remarked that “Democracy needs a place to sit down.” We need accessible, welcoming, wired public spaces for people to get together in order to solve problems, make decisions, and – perhaps most importantly – be part of a community. These can be public libraries, community centers, faith institutions, schools, theaters, museums, universities, and other kinds of buildings.

For the same reasons, we also need welcoming outdoor spaces, like parks, plazas, athletic fields, playgrounds, and amphitheaters.

Public libraries have been particularly adept at reinventing themselves as 21st Century community hubs, providing internet access, meeting spaces, and a variety of activities and services to a wide range of people.

“When designed, managed and programmed with intention, our shared public spaces can bring people back into public life to strengthen their communities and fortify our democracy.”

- [Reimagining the Civic Commons](#) report, 2023



= Rhode Island Example

Ways to capitalize on the potential of public spaces:

- ♦ Engaging people in designing or renovating them – organizations like the [PROJECT FOR PUBLIC SPACES](#) offer strategies for helping people make decisions, allocate funds, and contribute their own time, skills, and energy to the construction and maintenance of public spaces.
- ♦ Making public spaces accessible – to pedestrians, people with disabilities, and people using public transit to get there.



Baby chicks on display at the [West Warwick Public Library](#), which was named a finalist for the National Medal for Museum and Library Service, the nation's highest honor given to museums and libraries that demonstrate excellence in service to their communities.



In Lexington, Kentucky, the renovated [Charles Young Park](#) has a new playground and 'sprayground' designed largely by neighborhood kids through a partnership between the city and a nearby elementary school, with support from the Knight Foundation and Bluegrass Community Foundation. It has become the most visited park in downtown Lexington.

- ♦ Ensuring that there is programming that brings life to public spaces: music, theater, dance, food, sports, and activities for kids.
- ♦ Honoring the history of the community – recent as well as foundational – in naming parks and buildings and in creating displays and installations.



Photo by [GoProvidence](#)

SECTION 16



Putting It All Together

Combining programs and strategies for a comprehensive civic health plan

All the civic opportunities described in this guide are valuable, in different ways. For civic health planners (a category of leader that doesn't exist in most places, but should), this guide shows the possibilities and some of the existing Rhode Island examples – it is not a comprehensive assessment, nor an attempt to compare Rhode Island with other states.

The anecdotal evidence, however, suggests that the state has many strengths and many areas for improvement when it comes to civic health and civic opportunities. Civic health planners in Rhode Island have much to consider.

In Rhode Island, as in most states:

- ♦ Civic opportunities are often disconnected from one another – for example, most civic education programs don't lead directly to opportunities to use those civic skills, opportunities to inform public policy on an issue are disconnected from chances to volunteer on that issue, and programs for young people are disconnected from programs for seniors.
- ♦ Programs and initiatives that improve civic health have emerged separately, rather than as part of a plan – states and cities generally don't take stock of their

civic infrastructure and decide how to improve it.

♦ The civic health of a state or city is rarely measured, particularly not in ways that would assess whether and how a range of civic opportunities is able to achieve a collective impact on civic health.

The [HEALTHY DEMOCRACY ECOSYSTEM MAP](#) will provide one important tool for surveying the civic infrastructure of a state, city, or town. Produced by the Center for Democracy Innovation at the National Civic League, the Map provides the first comprehensive look at the universe of organizations promoting healthy democracy in America. The dataset includes groups working on a wide range of priorities: service and volunteerism, civic education, voter engagement, civic media, deliberation and participation, electoral reform,

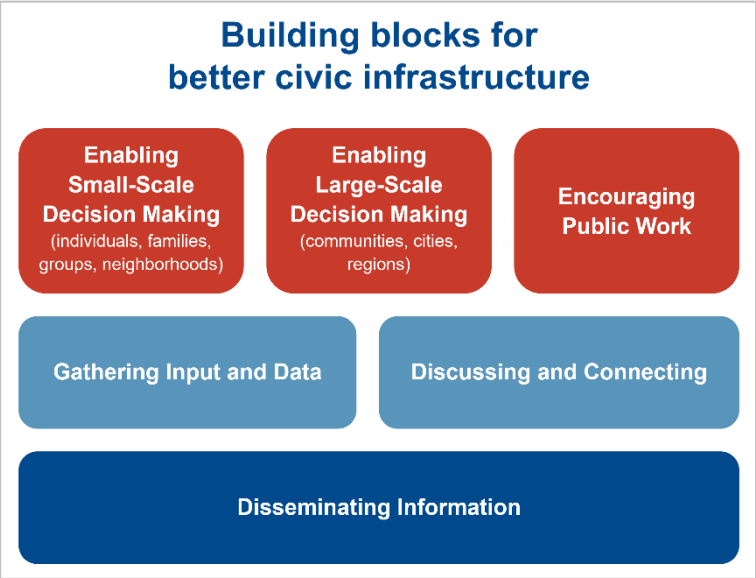


Chart from Nabatchi and Leighninger, *Public Participation for 21st Century Democracy*, Wiley 2015

Spectrum of Public Engagement Activities*					
* Adapted from a previous spectrum developed by the International Association for Public Participation					
TYPE OF ENGAGEMENT	CIRCULATING INFORMATION	DISCUSSING AND CONNECTING	GATHERING INITIAL INPUT	DELIBERATING AND RECOMMENDING	DECIDING AND ACTING
<i>what is happening</i>	Local governments, nonprofits, civic organizations, the media, and citizens themselves are making information available about key public issues. Some of this is raw data, provided in ways that make it easy to use and analyze. Some cities also use "citizen's academies" to give people a much closer look at how government works.	Citizens, local officials, city staff, and other stakeholders get regular opportunities to build relationships, discuss issues, and celebrate community.	Local governments, other organizations, the media, or citizens themselves reach out to gauge immediate public opinion on a particular issue or question.	Local governments, other organizations, the media, or citizens themselves recruit a wide range of people to address a public issue or decision. The sessions follow good group process guidelines. The participants talk about why the issue matters to them, consider a range of policy options, and make recommendations about what they think should be done.	Local officials and other decision-makers are making policy decisions, developing a plan, or creating a budget based (at least in part) on what they have heard from citizens and other stakeholders. Local officials, city staff, other organizations, and citizens themselves are taking action in a variety of ways to address key issues and opportunities.
<i>how it is happening</i>	• online • media coverage • public meetings • citizen's academies • online land use visualization tools • serious games	• public meetings • block parties • festivals • workshops • online forums	• surveys • polls • focus groups • listening sessions • public hearings • online crowd sourcing • Geographic Info. Systems (GIS) • online budget simulators	• small face-to-face discussions • online deliberations • large action forums or town hall meetings • deliberations that occur as part of existing meetings	• individual volunteer activities • action teams and committees • changes made by organizations • policy decisions • strategic plans • comp plans • budgets

Chart from Leighninger and Mann, *Planning for Stronger Local Democracy*, National League of Cities

organizing, bridge-building, and civic technology. The Map portal will allow people to view these organizations geographically (where they are), by network (how they're connected), and financially (how they're funded).

In addition to looking at civic health nationally, from the top down, it also makes sense to look at it from the ground up, from the perspective of the individual citizen. What kinds of activities should be available to people? The two charts on the previous page offer different ways of thinking about that question: the first focuses on the activities, the second on how one public institution – local government – can support them.

But it should be clear from this guide that civic health is more than a governmental responsibility. Better civic health benefits every community member, every organization, and every leader. Governments, school systems, foundations, universities, business associations, libraries, and other institutions can all play key roles in improving and sustaining civic infrastructure, but no single group should dictate the plan or bear the whole burden of implementing it.

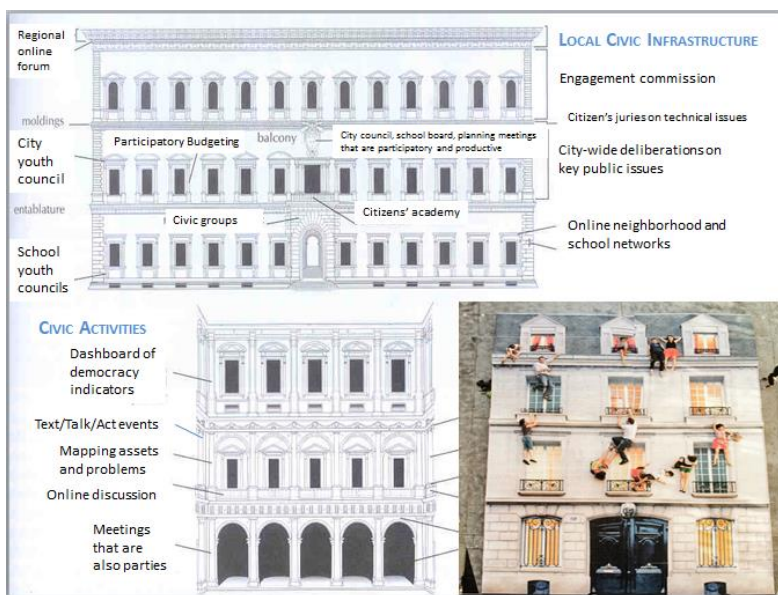


Chart from Nabatchi and Leighninger, *Public Participation for 21st Century Democracy*, Wiley 2015

In helping people plan for better civic health, we should also be creative. A fairly common practice in land use planning and visioning is to invite participants to take photographs or draw pictures of places in their community that they value or that need upgrading. This same approach can be used to more broadly imagine the possibilities for civic infrastructure in communities – see the image at left for one example.

Above all, the civic infrastructure of a place must reflect the needs and goals of its residents. There are no 'cookie-cutter' recipes for this work: every state, city, and town should develop ideas and plans that fit their own unique needs, assets, and goals – and their own creative vision of what kind of democracy they want.

Acknowledgements

We wish to thank all of the Rhode Islanders, from varying backgrounds and political perspectives, who contributed their time and knowledge to this report through a series of meetings and interviews with NCL.

We would especially like to thank those – listed below – who participated in the Discussion on Civic Life convening held at the Rhode Island Foundation on March 27, 2024.

- ARISE (Alliance of Rhode Island Southeast Asians for Education)
- Brown University Information Futures Lab
- Common Cause RI
- Fuerza Laboral
- Generation Citizen
- George Wiley Center
- Latino Policy Institute
- Media Education Lab/Courageous RI
- Newport Healthy Equity Zone, Women's Resource Center
- North Star Impact Group
- Pawtucket Central Falls Health Equity Zone, LISC Rhode Island
- PLEE (Parents Leading for Educational Equity)
- Rhode Island Council for the Humanities
- Rhode Island Library Association
- Rhode Island Transit Riders
- Rob Horowitz Associates
- Salve Regina, Pell Center
- The Public's Radio
- URI VOTES
- Young Voices