

## 2023 Schwartz Prize Nomination

### Rhode Island Humanities

#### 2022 Rhode Island Civic Health Index Initiative



#### Overview

Rhode Island Humanities supports public humanities as a grantmaker and through partnerships and strategic initiatives. The *2022 Rhode Island Civic Health Index* was our latest strategic initiative. We are proud to submit this initiative for consideration for the Schwartz Prize as a Council-conducted project.

We passionately believe that cultural participation contributes to civic health and that this connection is the basis for reaching more people and increasing investment in humanities. From 2020-2022, we worked with over 60 cultural organizations to document and assess this connection, resulting in a report titled *Culture is Key: Strengthening Rhode Island's Civic Health Through Cultural Participation*. A fundamental question emerged: in order to establish a framework to assess the impact of cultural organizations on civic health, we needed to have a baseline understanding — What IS the state of Rhode Island's civic health?

Funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities' *A More Perfect Union* initiative, which offered \$50,000 to humanities councils to prepare for the commemoration of the 250th anniversary of the American Revolution, supported us to create a *Civic Health Index* — the first ever in Rhode Island! — in partnership with the National Conference on Citizenship (NCoC) and the Rhode Island Department of State.

The *2022 Rhode Island Civic Health Index* draws upon data-driven indicators and information about diverse aspects of civic life to provide a baseline to help community members, cultural leaders, and policy makers understand what challenges and opportunities Rhode Islanders share.

The *Index* includes an introduction to Rhode Island; regional and national context; and in-depth discussions of five areas of civic health in Rhode Island: Community Well-Being, Social

Connection, Public Participation, Collective Understanding, and Engagement with Government. It was developed using existing data sources from the US Census, the Rhode Island Department of State, the *Rhode Island Life Index*, and recent reports on civic education and media literacy, along with new data from the 2022 RI Civic Health Index Survey created and distributed by RI Humanities.



We worked with 10 Community Partners from all parts of the state with diverse backgrounds and perspectives that broadened and deepened the dimensions of civic health represented in the report. Community Partners also designed and led community engagement with the *Index*. We additionally created bilingual banners that have traveled to libraries and community centers around the state.

In addition to the National Conference on Citizenship and the Secretary of State’s Office, we worked with organizational partners like Generation Citizen and the Brown University Policy Lab as well as academic advisors from four universities.

### Our Aims in Creating a Civic Health Index



Rhode Island Humanities embraced the opportunity to develop the state’s first *Civic Health Index* because we believe that understanding civic health is essential to envisioning the steps that we and other cultural organizations can take to improve it. By undertaking this project as a humanities council, we sought to define civic life in broad and inclusive ways; include humanities perspectives on the content, collection and analysis of data; and ensure active and meaningful engagement with what the report documents about civic life. We further believe that the findings of the *Civic Health Index* can play a unifying and catalyzing role for cultural and

humanities organizations to contribute to civic renewal, including through the commemoration of the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence.

## Public Impact

Overall, the public response to the *RI Civic Health Index* and all related engagement activities has been quite strong and quite positive. The team has been heartened by the consistently enthusiastic reception this project received, including the 14 (and counting) venues that exhibited the traveling exhibit, the thousands of exhibit viewers, the 50+ applicants for the Community Partner opportunity, the hundreds of *Index* readers and event attendees, and the 750+ survey participants. Among other things, this indicates robust community interest in and support for strengthening civic health in Rhode Island. We have also heard from colleagues across sectors—including state government, public health, and private philanthropy—that the information in the *Index* is already informing and supporting their work, and we look forward to examining the longer-term impact of the *Index* throughout civic life.

In terms of report distribution, RI Humanities has distributed 300+ print copies of the *Index*. Since the report's launch on September 27, 2022, the Council's *Index* webpage, which includes an embedded digital version of the *Index*, has been viewed over 1,200 times, and the launch video has been viewed 150 times.

While report distribution is critical, the project team felt strongly that it was only the first phase of sharing the *Index*'s messages with Rhode Islanders. Following the report's public release and the hiring of Engagement Facilitator Kate Hao, the Council proceeded with a multifaceted public campaign centered on organic community engagement. To raise awareness in civic spaces throughout the state, the Council designed and circulated a bilingual traveling exhibit showcasing information about the *Civic Health Index*. So far, the exhibit has been displayed at 14 different community venues, including libraries, Boys and Girls Clubs, film festivals, and all Community Partner events. The reported gate counts at these locations have so far exceeded 16,390. The banners will continue to circulate throughout the state indefinitely.



Five Community Partners chose to continue with the engagement phase of the project following the report’s publication. With support from the Engagement Facilitator, these Partners designed and hosted *Index*-focused events focused on their own communities, including the following:

- **November 19, 2022 / South Kingstown:** Community Partner Wanda Hopkins hosted a public Talking Circle at the University of Rhode Island for 50 people. The Circle featured responses to the *Index* by Native Americans who work in the public sector, and/or who have recently run for electoral office.
- **March 22, 2023 / Providence:** Community Partner Kilah Walters-Clinton discussed the *Civic Health Index* on the *Real Action Motivates Progress* podcast hosted by Tina G. Pedersen. Walters-Clinton also provided an in-person presentation to 18 students working with the nonprofit Rhode Island for Community and Justice.
- **March 24, 2023 / Newport:** Community Partner Cathleen Carr led an interactive workshop for 20 participants titled “Yes, and... Civic Health!” aiming to strengthen community relationships through improv comedy techniques.
- **April 2, 2023 / Woonsocket:** Community Partner Alex Kithes hosted the “Woonsocket Community Meeting: Civic Health,” a conversation among 15 participants reflecting on public engagement and civic life in Woonsocket.
- **April 15, 2023 / Providence:** Community Partner Chief Tureyguá Taíno Cay, Joel Rosario Tapia, hosted the Cibuco Bayamon Taíno Tribe Areito commemorating ancestors, culture, and memory, and attended by 50 participants.

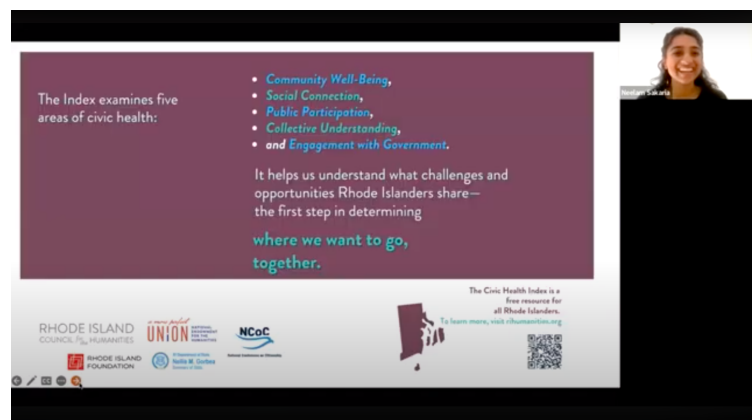




The *Index* has also been the focal point of events led by the Council and Rhode Island’s Congressional delegation. On January 13, the Council was thrilled to take part in a community conversation on the *Civic Health Index* hosted by Senator Jack Reed as part of a daylong visit to Rhode Island by National Endowment for the Humanities Chair Shelly Lowe. The event, which featured a panel of community leaders, was held at the Providence Public Library with 100 attendees, and a live stream of the

event featured on Senator Reed’s Facebook page drew over 1,000 viewers.

As a culminating event, on April 19, the Council convened Community Partners, academic advisors, and 90 participants in a virtual community conversation titled *Moving Forward, Together: A Community Conversation on the 2022 RI Civic Health Index*. Moderated by Data Consultant and *Index* Co-author Neelam Sakaria, the panel discussion focused on strengthening community well-being and community participation in Rhode Island.



Following the discussion, 40 participants joined the panelists in optional break-out room conversations focused on panel topics.

We have also experienced a great deal of interest from peer professional organizations in Rhode Island and nationally. Executive Director Elizabeth Francis spoke about the *Index* at the 2022 New England Museum Association conference and the 2022 National Humanities Conference, and also presented on the *Index* at meetings of the Rhode Island 250 Commission and a National Endowment for the Humanities staff Town Hall. Associate Director and *Index* Co-author Julia Renaud presented the findings during the keynote presentation of the 2023 Rhode Island Civics Week and in other venues, including a Brown University course.

## Funding, budget, and sustainability

The initiative's total budget was \$121,000. The initial development and production of the *Civic Health Index* was supported by \$50,000 from the National Endowment for the Humanities “A More Perfect Union” special opportunity. To ensure public engagement with the *Index*, we were able to leverage the NEH funds



through a \$45,000 grant from The Rhode Island Foundation. An individual donor contributed \$2,000, and the Council allocated \$24,000 of our core operational funds to support the project.

Funding components included:

- Partnership with the National Conference on Citizenship, including providing US Census data and data analysis, providing editorial guidance, managing design and production, and supporting outreach
- Compensation for community partners and outreach advisors
- Data Consultant
- Engagement Facilitator
- Communication materials including rack cards and banners
- Documentation and Promotion (event photography, video production)
- Culminating Event, including compensation for panelists
- Indirect costs and staffing

As we explore options for continuing the *Civic Health Index* at regular intervals, we plan to approach Rhode Island funders who share a commitment to civic health to establish a fund to support this effort.

## Application Questions

- *If you had to describe your project's impact on all involved in three words, what would they be?*

Unifying, affirming, galvanizing

- *What did your council staff learn from taking on this project, and how will that inform future projects?*



The *Index*'s findings have deeply influenced the Council's own programming and operations, shaping our public engagement and plans for future initiatives. As humanities organizations seek to commemorate the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence in 2026, the *Index* helps us to understand both our assets and our challenges in order to mobilize this anniversary as an opportunity for civic renewal. We were also able to include components of civic health that are connected to the humanities, including the perception of state history, the experience of monuments and memorials, and cultural participation.

In our approach to developing the *Index*, the Council broadened and deepened the framing and indicators of civic health to be more inclusive of diverse communities and experiences all over Rhode Island. We also became much more comfortable with working with and analyzing existing data sets, as well as generating new ones using ethical, person-centered, and scientifically sound methods. The experience affirmed our sense that humanities practitioners are

uniquely equipped to interpret and weave together data-driven stories, and made us more confident in doing so in the future.

By placing the perspectives and priorities of paid Community Partners at the center of the *Index*, we also extended our own practice as an organization to ensure that we are integrating and elevating community voices in an equitable way. We frequently interact with community members as applicants and grantees, relationships that inherently contain unequal power dynamics and transactional elements. By inviting compensated Community Partners to co-create the *Index* with us, and supporting them to realize their visions of *Index*-centered events, we built generative, authentic relationships that led to generative, authentic community engagement with the project. We will continue and highlight these practices in our forthcoming Strategic Plan and Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility Action Plan.

- *Fast forward three years into the future: where do you see this project? Has it evolved? If it was intended to have a shorter life-span, what was its impact?*

In three years, we hope for another iteration of the *RI Civic Health Index* to be either published or well underway. This first report set a necessary baseline, and now we can leverage these initial insights to build a complex, evolving picture of change over time in the state's civic health. We

are continuing existing conversations and strengthening new connections to explore how the *Index* can be a sustainable, responsive, and regularly published project that can inform critical work all over the state.

A key part of this effort will be maintaining and expanding upon our *Index* data collection efforts. Now that we have a much more comprehensive understanding of what civic health-related data is and is not being regularly collected, we can work with our partners to devise specific research questions and collect targeted data to fill the gaps in the RI data ecosystem. As such, three years from now, we will have already amassed the primary non-US Census data sets to inform the next report.



As indicated from these sections, collaboration will continue to serve as the central ethos of our work. Over the next three years, we will work to deepen and strengthen our existing partnerships with individuals and organizations across all spheres of civic life, as well as explore and nurture new ones. One such possibility is with the newly formed Rhode Island Nonprofit Resource Center, which, among many functions, will focus on data related to the nonprofit sector. We have also received consistently strong responses from colleagues in the public health sector, another avenue for future collaboration.

Of course, our core community is the humanities and cultural organizations in the state. In our 2022 report *Culture Is Key: Strengthening Rhode Island's Civic Health through Cultural Participation*, we established a number of common outcomes of cultural organizations' work that are confirmed indicators of civic health. In the next three years, we will use this work to aid cultural organizations in identifying their work's current impact on civic health, as well as developing strategies to deepen it.

- *What partners or collaborators would you like to acknowledge, and what was their impact on this program?*

We approached the *2022 RI Civic Health Index* as an attempt to describe civic life in the state inclusively and accurately. With this vision in mind, we sought for the *Index* to encompass as many of the complexities, tensions, and perspectives of our diverse state as possible. To achieve this, and in keeping with our organizational values of community and collaboration, we placed equitable partnerships and collaborations at the project's core.

The project would not have been possible without the generous support of the "A More Perfect Union" initiative of the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Rhode Island Foundation, as well as the contributions of private donors. The National Conference on Citizenship (NCoC), the creator and producer of the *Civic Health Index*, served as our foundational project partner, with Communications Director Cameron Blossom and Research and Evaluation Director Jeff Coates as primary contributors. The Rhode Island Department of



State (DoS) was another primary partner, providing expert insights as well as data and analyses. Data Consultant Neelam Sakaria co-authored the *Index* with Council Associate Director of Grants and Strategic Initiatives Julia Renaud, and played an invaluable role in collecting and analyzing disparate data sets as well as working with Community Partners.

In addition to the key partners at the NCoC and DoS, the Council collaborated with the Policy Lab at Brown University, the Media Education Lab at University of Rhode Island, and Generation Citizen. Academic advisors from different universities also provided critical context and feedback: Julie C. Keller, Associate Professor of Sociology and Director of the Social Science Institute for Research, Education, and Policy, University of Rhode Island; Nicholas V. Longo, Professor of Global Studies and Co-Director of the Dialogue, Inclusion, and Democracy Lab, Providence College; Evelyn Sterne, Associate Professor of History and Director of the Center for the Humanities, University of Rhode Island; and Yinjiao Ye, Professor and Director of Graduate Studies, Communication Studies, University of Rhode Island.

In conceiving the project, we felt it critical to not only have organizational and academic voices shaping the *Index*, but also a range of community perspectives. As described on page 11 of the *Index*:

“The work of the Community Partners is critical to the philosophy and design of this project, and, to our knowledge, is unique among Civic Health Indexes. For the *Index* to truly reflect perspectives in the state, it was imperative to have different community voices informing the report from the beginning. Selected from over 50 applicants, the group ultimately included 10 individuals deeply involved in their communities from across Rhode Island, ranging from high school seniors to senior citizens, and had six members who identified as Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC). All Community Partners received compensation for the time and energy spent on the *Index*.”



The Community Partners worked together via Zoom during three, two-hour sessions from March to May 2022, engaging in deep, probing, and wide-ranging conversations about their experiences with civic health in Rhode Island, and how civic life takes place in their communities. These conversations shaped the questions and framing of the CHI Survey as well as informed the interpretation of the survey’s findings. Community Partners also shared their invaluable feedback on a draft of this *Index*.”

The Council is incredibly grateful to our Community Partners for their many contributions to the project: Cathleen Carr, Christine Costa, Diana Figueroa, Wanda Hopkins, Mariam Kaba, Alex Kithes, Mr. Joel Rosario Tapia, MSc/Chief Tureygua Taino Cay, Doug Victor, Kilah Walters-Clinton, and Jannessa Ya.

Furthermore, five of our Partners chose to continue working with the Council following the publication of the *Index*, developing and hosting five community events centered on the *Index* as well as one podcast. Engagement Facilitator Kate Hao proved invaluable for this engagement phase of the project, as did two compensated Outreach Advisors and 10 volunteer Community Ambassadors.

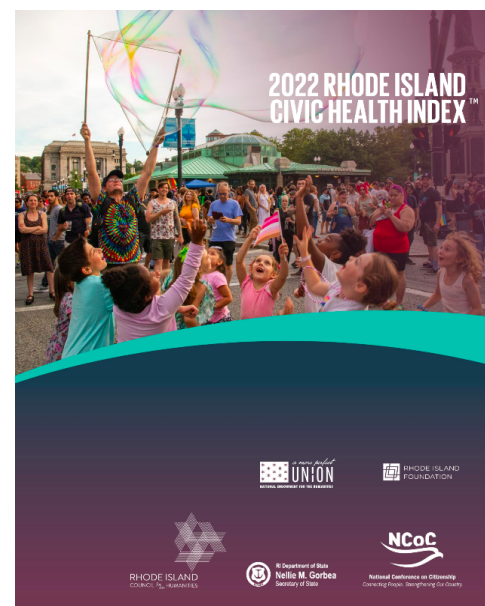
As mentioned above, to complement, deepen, and expand existing data sets, the Humanities Council developed and administered a survey in Spring 2022. As a result of outreach by the Community Partners and the Council’s networks, 751 Rhode Islanders took the CHI Survey between April 21 and May 4, 2022, ensuring that the *Index* contained current information about Rhode Islanders’ relationships with their neighbors, communities, and state history.

As stated on p. 8 of the *Index*, “Our collaborative approach affirmed how productive the articulation of shared goals can be. The Humanities Council’s network of community, organizational, government and academic partners helped to generate an *Index* that has a broad, deep, and inclusive reach. We would not have been able to achieve this on our own, and, perhaps more importantly, this network of partners is, itself, an expression of civic health.”

- *How does this project fulfill a need within your community?*

The *Civic Health Index* affirmed for Rhode Islanders the many meaningful ways that they feel connected to and involved in their communities. At the same time, it offered opportunities to acknowledge and reflect on the barriers and difficulties that many Rhode Islanders face, including financial precarity, lack of civic education, weakness of local media, social isolation, and government distrust.

We have often wanted a data-driven synthesis and representation of civic life, and often heard from others that they needed it too. Moreover, by establishing areas of civic health that include experiences of place and understanding of history, the *Index* suggests ways that public humanities organizations and practitioners can connect stories and experiences to the improvement of civic health.



Because the *Index* reports on many dimensions of civic health, it allowed us to bring together vital questions that can be addressed collectively in many contexts:

- What steps can we take to address racial inequities in communities across Rhode Island?
- What tools or spaces have proven useful or accessible for starting dialogues with Rhode Islanders unlike yourself? If you have not found these tools or spaces yet, what do you feel would be most helpful?

- Think about the non-governmental civic institutions that have been most impactful in your life—for example, local heritage societies, parks, and independent corner stores. What resources would allow those institutions to impact even more Rhode Islanders? What would it require to provide those resources?
- The *Civic Health Index* calls for ensuring that the state’s monuments and historic sites inclusively reflect the stories and perspectives of Indigenous Rhode Islanders and all Rhode Islanders of color. What do you see as the importance and impact of more inclusive monuments and historic sites in Rhode Island?
- What will it take to achieve greater investment in local independent media? How could this transform the state’s civic landscape?
- What do you see working well in Rhode Island when it comes to government transparency on the state, city, or neighborhood levels? What needs improvement, and how could that improvement be made?

## Testimonials

“The *2022 Rhode Island Civic Health Index* shows where we are as a state—the affirming connections we have and troubling challenges we face—and frames questions about how we can move forward. Deeply rooted in the perspectives of community members and informed by policy, recent research, and humanities methods, this project has resulted in a valuable resource for Rhode Island and propelled our work in important new directions. It establishes an evidence-based foundation for humanities to improve civic life and to document our impact.”

—Elizabeth Francis, Executive Director, Rhode Island Humanities

### *From Press Release*

“The first-ever *Rhode Island Civic Health Index* paints a comprehensive picture of civic life in the state compared to the rest of the nation, and Rhode Islanders have shown they vote, donate, and attend public meetings at very high rates.”

—Jeff Coates, Research and Evaluation Director at the National Conference on Citizenship

“The health of our democracy is measured by our collective civic engagement. Historically, we have relied on anecdotes as guidance for public policy, and voting has been our only measure of civic health. But an active civic life is much more than casting a ballot—it also includes things like attending public meetings or volunteering in one’s community. I am proud to be a partner with the RI Council for the Humanities in democratizing our state’s data so that we can measure and improve civic engagement and civic life in Rhode Island.”

—Former Rhode Island Secretary of State Nellie Gorbea

### *Community Partner Testimonials from Launch Video*

“The *Rhode Island Civic Health Index* is important to me because it includes the voices of the Indigenous people of Rhode Island. This voice is a unique voice that is often left out, so it’s

really important to me that the *Rhode Island Civic Health Index* captured some of the ways that our community continues to exist and maintain its indigeneity here in Rhode Island.”

—Wanda Hopkins (Narragansett), Community Partner, Hopkinton

“*The Rhode Island Civic Health Index* is very important to me because as a community leader with an area nonprofit, it reveals a critical baseline that we’ve been missing in terms of how we are engaging authentically with all members of the community.”

—Cathleen Carr, Community Partner, South Kingstown

“As a lifelong resident, non-profit director, and community leader in Woonsocket, the *Rhode Island Civic Health Index* is so important to me because my community and so many others like it around the state are so often left behind.”

—Alex Kithes, Community Partner, Woonsocket

“As a city planner, the *RI Civic Health Index* is important to me because it places civic health at the forefront of strong and sustainable communities. This study will help Rhode Island understand the equity issues at hand, and evaluate the impact of the work we are all doing in public service.”

—Diana Figueroa, Community Partner, Pawtucket

“*The Civic Health Index* is important to me as a parent and an educator. This report examines the social and political wellbeing in Rhode Island and enables us to understand how to build informed, connected, and actively engaged communities.”

—Community Partner, Tiverton

#### *Community Partner Event Participant Testimonials*

“Really enjoyed it. Love learning about cultures/customs from different backgrounds.”

“There’s surprisingly more hope than I thought.”

“It was fun! It inspired me to keep volunteering.”

“I’m filled with gratitude and am leaving today with a much needed recharged battery.”

#### **Links to the Civic Health Index, connected documents, and images**

- A PDF copy of the Civic Health Index: <https://bit.ly/3OErhYr>
- Selected images of Community Partner events and Civic Health Conversation with NEH Chair: [https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1owBybIy9bI0XbzaP9Uygipcpcpl0nj\\_Y](https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1owBybIy9bI0XbzaP9Uygipcpcpl0nj_Y)

- Program on Rhode Island Humanities website, including RI Civic Health Index, Executive Summaries, Civic Health Index survey data, and online feedback survey: <https://rihumanities.org/program/ri-civic-health-index/>
- Information on RI Civic Health Index Traveling Exhibit: <https://rihumanities.org/program/ri-civic-health-index/2022-ri-chi-traveling-exhibit/>
- Press Release: <https://rihumanities.org/2022-rhode-island-civic-health-index-shows-high-levels-of-engagement-room-for-growth-a-resource-for-all-rhode-islanders/>

### **Video Recordings**

- Civic Health Index Launch (September 27, 2022): <https://youtu.be/Ax96w1qHELE>
- Community Conversation on Civic Health (January 13, 2023): <https://youtu.be/G9u4YYURNK4>
- Moving Forward, Together recording (April 19, 2023): <https://rihumanities.org/video-recording-moving-forward-together-a-community-conversation-on-the-2022-ri-civic-health-index/>