

## Brain Waves Rhode Island presents brain fair March 9th

PAWTUCKET – For the ninth year, Brain Waves Rhode Island (BWRI), formerly Brain Week Rhode Island, returns with its annual celebration of International Brain Week, a global campaign to increase public awareness of the progress and benefits of brain research. Young, old, and in-between are invited to immerse themselves in the mysteries and intricacies of the brain during BWRI's Pawtucket Brain Fair, on March 9, 10am–2pm, at Hope Artiste Village, 1005 Main Street, Pawtucket.

Each year, BWRI also collaborates with the Brown Brain Fair, which will take place on Saturday, March 16 at Brown Engineering Research Center, 345 Brook Street, Providence, 10am–2pm. These special events invite the community to learn about basic science, brain health, interact with brain science labs, familiarize themselves with community resources and experience the thrill of discovery. Both events are free of charge and open to the public.

**DR. VICTORIA HEIMER-MCGINN**, Co-Chair and President of BWRI, said, “We’ve had a very busy year. We obtained our status as a not-for-profit 501(c3) organization, we rebranded to Brain Waves Rhode Island to better represent the work we do year-round, and we added new members to our board of directors.” She continued, “BWRI’s mission has not changed. We continue to present programs that will inspire and empower more people to choose science as a career, especially people from communities that are underrepresented in the sciences.” Dr. Heimer-McGinn is an Assistant Professor at Roger Williams University, where she and her students study how neuropsychiatric conditions like bipolar disease affect cognition. In 2019 she received the Next Generation Award from the international Society for Neuroscience in recognition of her contributions to public neuroscience education and outreach.

**DR. KRISTIN SCAPLEN**, Co-Chair of BWRI said, “I love any opportunity to bring neuroscience out of the lab into our local community and get students excited about their most precious commodity – their brain.” She added, “This year we have so



Brown Brain Fair 2023. [PHOTOS BY JUSTIN CASE, COURTESY OF BRAIN WAVES RI]

many great things happening – from our name change to a new pilot program that allow schools to incorporate brain science activities and experiments into their curriculum. This program will give students an opportunity to showcase the work they have done in the classroom at the Pawtucket Brain Fair. We intend to expand this program to include more schools over the next couple of years.” Dr. Scaplen is an Assistant Professor of Neuroscience at Bryant University and an Adjunct Professor of Neuroscience at Brown University. At Bryant Dr. Scaplen runs a lab powered by undergraduates that studies how the brain changes in the context of alcohol addiction. She and her work have been featured on GBH News: All Things Considered with Arun Rath and numerous news outlets.

Since 2016, BWRI has highlighted the wonders of the human brain and the wealth of neuroscience research happening in the Ocean State. Through BWRI, specialists in many fields are

brought together to make brain science and brain health accessible for everyone. In addition to the Brain Fair, BWRI provides free in-classroom BRAINY visits to K–12 schools in Providence, Pawtucket and Central Falls throughout the months of February and March. Since its inception, BWRI has actively been to more than 30 schools, reached more than 4,000 students, held more than 50 events, and created more than 20 online resources for participants. ❖



(Left) Dr. Victoria Heimer-McGinn, Co-Chair and President, Brain Waves RI. (Right) Dr. Kristin Scaplen, Co-Chair, Brain Waves RI.



## RIDOH, RIAG make public The Centurion Foundation HCA application

PROVIDENCE – The Rhode Island Department of Health (RIDOH) and Rhode Island Attorney General **PETER F. NERONHA** have released the Initial Hospital Conversion application submitted to the State for the proposed sale of Roger Williams Medical Center and Our Lady of Fatima Hospital.

The application was submitted by the Centurion Foundation Inc. and Prospect Medical Holdings, Inc. The Centurion Foundation is looking to acquire the two hospitals, which are operated by CharterCARE and are currently owned by Prospect Medical Holdings, Inc. The Centurion Foundation Inc. is a Georgia-based non-profit company. This proposed transaction is subject to the review and approval of RIDOH and the Attorney General, the two regulatory entities empowered to oversee hospital conversions in Rhode Island.

Consistent with the standard process set forth by The Hospital Conversions Act (HCA), the Attorney General and RIDOH deemed Centurion's application complete in December. The Attorney General and RIDOH have now released the application to the public with redactions for confidential commercial information of the parties, in accordance with the provisions of the HCA. The application is available on the sites of Attorney General Neronha (<https://riag.ri.gov/about-our-office/divisions-and-units/civil-division/public-protection/healthcare>) and RIDOH (<https://health.ri.gov/programs/hospitalconversionsmerger/>).

Additionally, the Attorney General and RIDOH are announcing that two public hearings will be held in the near future on this proposed transaction. The dates, times, and locations of these meetings will be announced shortly and will include options of joining in person and virtually. The purpose of these meetings is to hear from members of the public about their thoughts and opinions regarding the application.

Public comments will be taken into consideration by the Attorney General and RIDOH as they complete their review of this application.

Following the informational public meetings, the Attorney General and RIDOH will continue their review of the application. Under the HCA, the review must be completed within 180 days of the date that the application is accepted for review, which is June 11, 2024. ❖

## VA announces available grants for community organizations addressing suicide prevention

WASHINGTON – Recently, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) announced the availability of \$52.5 million in funding for grants to community-based organizations that provide or coordinate suicide prevention services for Veterans and their families – including conducting Veteran mental health screenings, providing case management and peer support services, delivering emergency clinical services, reaching out to Veterans at risk of suicide, and more.

These grants will be awarded through VA's Staff Sergeant Parker Gordon Fox Suicide Prevention Grant Program. The Notice of Funding Opportunity provides information about the program, eligibility, and award process. Applications are due by 11:59 pm E.T., April 26 and awards will be granted to eligible entities by Sept. 30, 2024. The funds will be used by the selected organizations in fiscal year 2025.

Ending Veteran suicide is VA's top clinical priority and a key part of fulfilling President Biden's Unity Agenda for the nation. Since 2021, VA has worked aggressively to expand support for Veterans in crisis, including offering no-cost health care to Veterans in suicidal crisis at VA or non-VA facilities; launching the 988 (then press 1) to help Veterans connect more quickly with caring, qualified responders through the Veterans Crisis Line; partnering with community-based suicide prevention organizations to provide Veterans with on-the-ground support; expanding firearm suicide prevention efforts; and encouraging Veterans to reach out for help through a national Veteran suicide prevention awareness campaign. Moving forward, VA and the Biden-Harris Administration will continue to work urgently to end Veteran suicide through a public health approach that combines both community-based and clinically based strategies to save lives.

"Veterans in crisis should always have access to the services and support they need – including mental health screenings, peer support, emergency services, and more," said VA Secretary **DENIS MC-DONOUGH**. "There are countless great organizations across America that work side-by-side with VA to do this life-saving work, and we are proud to support their efforts."

This will be the third round of grants awarded as part of VA's Staff Sergeant Parker Gordon Fox Suicide Prevention Grant Program. In September 2023, VA awarded grants totaling \$52.5 million to 80 community-based organizations in 43 states, Washington, D.C., Guam, and American Samoa. The grant program is named after Parker Gordon Fox, a sniper instructor who died by suicide at the age of 25.

Grant funding will be divided into two priorities. Under Priority 1, VA will provide opportunities for funding to those entities with existing SSG Fox SPGP awards. Under Priority 2, new organizations can apply for grants worth up to \$750,000. Following the selection of Priority 1 grantee applicants, any remaining funds will be awarded according to Priority 2. VA may prioritize the distribution of suicide prevention services grants under this priority to: (i) Rural communities; (ii) Tribal lands; (iii) Territories of the United States; (iv) Medically underserved areas; (v) Areas with a high number or percentage of minority Veterans or women Veterans; and (vi) Areas with a high number or percentage of calls to the Veterans Crisis Line. ❖

## Blue Cross & Blue Shield of Rhode Island gives \$648K in 2024 community grants to programs focused on housing as the foundation of health

PROVIDENCE – Blue Cross & Blue Shield of Rhode Island (BCBSRI) has once again committed its annual BlueAngel Community Health Grant program to addressing housing-related health inequities, awarding \$648,000 in 2024 to initiatives led by 10 area non-profit social service organizations. This is the fifth consecutive year that the grants, established in 2002, have focused on supporting access to safe, stable, and affordable housing throughout Rhode Island.

The funding includes \$313,000 for five organizations being awarded new grants and an additional \$335,000 in transitional funding for five grantees from 2023 to continue their successful initiatives.

The projects address a range of housing-related issues that are foundational to wellness, including housing and wraparound services for families with children, housing and outreach to individuals who are experiencing homelessness, and housing support and advocacy for individuals with substance use disorder.

“Too many Rhode Islanders face significant health-related needs and housing continues to be one of the most challenging areas,” said BCBSRI President & CEO **MARTHA L. WOFFORD**. “We’re proud to partner with community organizations who share our unwavering commitment to improved access to safe and affordable housing and a healthier and more equitable Rhode Island.”

BCBSRI’s philanthropy is guided, in part, by the annual RI Life Index, a statewide survey of Rhode Islanders administered in partnership with the Brown University School of Public Health. The Index, now in its sixth year, has consistently shown that access to safe, stable, and affordable housing is a top concern for Rhode Islanders across the state. In 2023, a year after the affordable housing Index score plummeted from 40 to 33 on a scale of 100, the results were essentially unchanged at 32. High interest rates, steep home prices, low vacancy rates and increasing rents continued to prevent Rhode Island families from affording housing.

BCBSRI Managing Director of Corporate Social Responsibility **CAROLYN BELISLE** said, “The RI Life Index, since its very first year, has underscored that housing is perceived by Rhode Islanders to be one of the most significant barriers to health and well-being in our state and led us to begin directing our health grants toward housing-related programs. The Index’s annual results continue to demonstrate the urgency of supporting organizations committed to working proactively and effectively to develop housing solutions. As in previous years, we’re pleased that our community partners are addressing the critical needs of a highly diverse and vulnerable group of Rhode Islanders.”

The 2024 awards bring the five-year total investment in affordable housing to nearly \$2.7 million. Since the grant program began in 2002, BCBSRI has donated more than \$6.9 million to local organizations, funding critical work that has impacted the lives of more than 336,000 Rhode Islanders.

These five organizations and projects have been chosen to receive 2024 grants:

**Foster Forward** – Utilizing a Housing First approach to house youth/young adults ages 18 to 24 who are experiencing housing instability and homelessness and are at-risk of system involvement. The grant will fund the Your Way Home program, a short-term crisis intervention that provides rental assistance and case management services.

**Child & Family Services of Newport County** – Child & Family’s Supportive Housing Program in Newport provides safe, secure housing to homeless families that come from throughout the state. Through participation in this program, parents are provided with wraparound case management and access to a continuum of care that provides the resources necessary for them to secure permanent housing and improve the overall health and well-being of their families.

**Thundermist Healthcare Center** – Housing support specialists work in partnership with people who are or are in danger of becoming unhoused, to build resources that promote independence, ensure that they can meet the obligations of tenancy, and successfully obtain and maintain housing. Specialists guide patients through paperwork and connect them to resources for legal and financial support to gain or retain permanent housing.

**Project Weber/RENEW** – Supports housing for people who have substance use disorder and people in early recovery, including assistance with expungement of criminal records and advocacy and education at the state level on policies and practices around Housing First and harm reduction models.

**House of Hope CDC** – Preserve and upgrade 20 units of existing permanent affordable housing units in Warwick for men, women, and children and, in collaboration with Amenity Aid, promote community health through the distribution of hygiene supplies across the state. House of Hope CDC Street outreach teams will use the hygiene kits as a trust-building engagement tool.

A year after being awarded a BlueAngel Community Health Grant, recipients are eligible for, and encouraged to apply for, transitional funding to build upon programs that have demonstrated success. Transitional funding totaling \$335,000 is being provided this year to the following: **Adoption Rhode Island, Habitat for Humanity of South County, Jonnycake Center for Hope, West Elmwood Housing Development Corporation, and Westbay Community Action, Inc.**

Funding is made available through the Blue Cross & Blue Shield of Rhode Island Community Health Fund, a donor advised fund at the Rhode Island Foundation. The grant selection process began in July with a call for letters of intent.

More information about the grant program is available at [bcbstri.com/about/blueangel](https://bcbstri.com/about/blueangel). ❖



## Coastal Medical switches to Lifespan's EHR

PROVIDENCE – Coastal Medical, a Lifespan entity, transitioned to Lifespan's electronic health record (EHR), LifeChart, and patient portal, MyLifespan, using Epic software.

The new platform will enhance the patient experience with:

- The ability to view health records for Lifespan primary care locations, hospitals, specialists, laboratories, and imaging in one patient portal (MyLifespan).
- Streamlined portal alerts for Lifespan test results, such as lab and imaging.
- Added functionality like online scheduling, appointment waitlists, and video visits for some appointment types.
- Speedier check-in process that allows patients to update information prior to their visit.

“Coastal Medical’s adoption of Lifespan’s EHR is cause for much excitement because it allows for one patient record to be shared by all Lifespan entities,” said **ED MCGOOKIN**, president of Coastal Medical. “This change will help to improve continuity of care, increase patient safety and enhance operational efficiencies – a win-win situation for both our patients and our employees.” ❖

## Six Lifespan Physician Group (LPG) Primary Care Practices rebranded as Coastal Medical

PROVIDENCE – Throughout 2023, Lifespan Physician Group (LPG) Primary Care and Coastal Medical worked closely together to provide a wider array of primary care services and programs to patients.

As of February 5, 2024, Coastal Medical announced that six LPG Primary Care practices have officially taken on the Coastal Medical name and brand:

- Coastal Medical Cranston Primary Care  
1500 Pontiac Ave., Suite 101, Cranston
- Coastal Medical Jamestown Primary Care  
20 Southwest Ave., Jamestown
- Coastal Medical Metacom Primary Care  
639 Metacom Ave., Warren
- Coastal Medical Newport County Primary Car  
formerly 50 Memorial Blvd (see satellite locations)
- Coastal Medical Tiverton Primary Care  
711 Main Rd., Tiverton
- Coastal Medical Warwick Primary Care  
501 Centerville Rd., Suite 101, Warwick

In addition to the current Coastal clinical services and programs already being offered, patients at these practices who are 18 and older now have access to Coastal365 locations, which offer adult sick visits (by appointment only) after-hours, on weekends, and holidays. Patients will be notified of additional primary care clinical services/programs as they become available.

The integration and rebranding to Coastal Medical will be seamless for patients. For patients at these locations, their clinicians, practice locations, care teams, appointments, and patient portal will not change due to this integration. ❖

# Help your Patients Keep their Medicaid Coverage

Medicaid members will need to renew their eligibility with the State of Rhode Island to keep their health insurance.

You can help now by reminding your Medicaid patients to update their account information with their current address and phone number. Medicaid members can update their information by:

- Logging into their HealthSource RI account: <https://healthyrhode.ri.gov/>
- Calling HealthSource RI at 1-855-840-4774 (TTY 711)

Thank you from all of us at Neighborhood for your commitment and partnership in ensuring Rhode Island families keep their health care coverage!



Neighborhood members can scan the QR code to update their address through our new e-form or visit [www.nhpri.org](http://www.nhpri.org)



[www.nhpri.org](http://www.nhpri.org) 1-800-459-6019 (TTY 711)

## University Orthopedics launches Comprehensive Spasticity Management Clinic

EAST PROVIDENCE – With the formation of its Comprehensive Spasticity Management Clinic, University Orthopedics recently announced it is now able to offer a multidisciplinary and comprehensive approach to spasticity treatment that is unique in Rhode Island and Greater Boston.

The clinic is led by **ZACHARY BOHART, MD**, a board-certified physiatrist and an expert in spasticity management.

Spasticity, which can be the result of stroke, multiple sclerosis, or other neurological conditions, causes certain muscles to contract involuntarily. The resulting stiffness can impede voluntary movement, making everyday tasks like self-care, physical therapy, and even sleep, difficult.



**Zachary Bohart, MD**, a board-certified physiatrist and an expert in spasticity management, will lead the new Comprehensive Spasticity Management Clinic at University Orthopedics. [COURTESY UNIVERSITY ORTHOPEDICS]



“Timely treatment for spasticity really can help improve a patient’s quality of life. Unfortunately, there is a tremendous shortage of doctors treating this debilitating condition in our area,” Dr. Bohart said. “We believe that the Comprehensive Spasticity Management Clinic will help more patients find relief from their symptoms without having to travel far from home.”

The Comprehensive Spasticity Management Clinic at University Orthopedics offers three of today’s most effective treatments for spasticity:

- Botox injection therapy
- Phenol nerve-block injection therapy
- Intrathecal baclofen (ITB) pump placement and therapy

“When given early, before contracture sets in, injection therapy can ease symptoms and help patients better participate in physical and occupational therapy to gain strength, flexibility, and the ability to work on everyday self-care skills,” Dr. Bohart said.

While the causes vary, UOI’s Spasticity Management Clinic most often treats spasticity that is the result of:

- Stroke
- Multiple Sclerosis
- Spinal Cord Injury
- Brain Injury
- Cerebral Palsy

Additional effective, non-surgical treatment options the clinic offers include:

- Exercise programs
- Pharmacological management
- Bracing and splinting
- Therapeutic heat, cold, and electrical stimulation

When injection treatment isn’t appropriate and surgical treatment may be warranted, Dr. Bohart’s team works closely with their surgical colleagues at University Orthopedics to help find the best, least invasive solution, to maximize a patient’s comfort and functioning. ❖

## Aquablation therapy now available at South County Hospital

WAKEFIELD – **ARNOLD SARAZEN, MD**, Chief of Surgery and Urology at South County Health, performed the first Aquablation procedure at South County Hospital on January 20, 2024. This procedure, Aquablation therapy, is the latest in medical technology for men suffering from Benign Prostatic Hyperplasia (BPH), also known as enlarged prostate.

Now available at South County Hospital, Aquablation therapy is an advanced, minimally invasive treatment that allows surgeons to use the power of water delivered with robotic precision to provide long-lasting BPH relief without compromise and minimal risk of irreversible complications like incontinence, erectile dysfunction, and ejaculatory dysfunction, all with a fast recovery time.

“We are proud to be the first in Southern Rhode Island to offer a solution for men with BPH that provides significant, long-lasting symptom relief, with lower risk to sexual function and continence,” said Dr. Sarazen. “Aquablation therapy is the next step to furthering our commitment to innovation and providing access to new technological advancements to our community. Being able to provide this treatment, right here in South County, is going to significantly improve the lives of our patients.”



**Arnold Sarazen, MD**, Chief of Surgery and Urology at South County Health, performed South County Hospital's first Aquablation procedure on January 20, 2024 using the AquaBeam System. He's pictured here with Kristin Pearce, surgical technician, and Patrice Rocha, operating room RN. [SOUTH COUNTY HEALTH]

Aquablation therapy is performed by board-certified surgeons specializing in urology using the AquaBeam® Robotic System. The procedure combines real-time, multi-dimensional imaging, automated robotics, and heat-free waterjet ablation for targeted, controlled, and immediate

removal of prostate tissue. This technology allows for the creation of a personalized treatment plan tailored to each patient's anatomy. Aquablation therapy is performed under anesthesia in South County Hospital's operating room. ❖

## Rhode Island Hospital, Alpert Medical School to join national clinical trials resource center

MORGANTOWN, WV; PROVIDENCE – Rhode Island Hospital and Advance Rhode Island-Clinical and Translational Research, a National Institute of General Medical Sciences (NIGMS)-funded research partnership out of the Alpert Medical School are now part of a new clinical trials resource center. This National Institutes of Health (NIH)-funded project is headquartered at West Virginia University.

Launched in fall 2023, the IDeA State Consortium for Clinical Research Resource Center (ISCORE-RC) will enhance training and resources to ultimately increase the number of clinical trials in Institutional Development Award (IDeA) states, those 23 states and the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, that traditionally have relatively low rates of funding from the NIH and limited numbers of NIH-funded clinical trials.

This five-year grant, with estimated funding of approximately

\$2.85 million, was awarded to **DR. SALLY HODDER**, West Virginia Clinical and Translational Science Institute (WVCTSI) director, associate vice president for clinical and translational science at WVU, and Chancellor's Preeminent Scholar Chair.

A variety of assets will be provided through the creation of the ISCORE-RC to establish two distinct resources: 1) a clinical research coordinator development program (CRCDP) and 2) a clinical trials service center (CTSC). The CRCDP will train clinical research coordinators at sites across the country with self-paced online learning modules paired with mentorship and supervised hands-on training. The CTSC will address common barriers using a multifaceted approach including communication of upcoming clinical trials opportunities to IDeA investigators and effective marketing of IDeA states.

“Clinical trials are an important step in the cycle of bringing



advances in medicine to the patients who need them most, and we have to ensure that underserved populations are not left out of the process. ISCORE-RC will help us provide cutting-edge care to all Rhode Islanders,” said **MUKESH K. JAIN, MD**, senior vice president for health affairs and dean of medicine and biological sciences at Brown University.

**DR. SHARON ROUNDS**, principal investigator of the Advance RI-CTR program, noted, “We’ve been impressed with the organization at WVCTSI under Dr. Sally Hodder and are pleased to support this successful award. The training that will be given to clinical trial coordinators as part of ISCORE-RC dovetails perfectly with Advance RI-CTR’s mission to support clinical and translational research in Rhode Island.”

The grant is led by Brown advance-CTR principal investigator Dr. Rounds and **DR. GHADA BOURJEILY**, professor of medicine, health services, policy and practice at Brown University and Lifespan.

“We are very excited to participate in this key opportunity to enhance clinical trials at the institution and the state of RI and strengthen our clinical research workforce so that we can offer cutting edge research to our patient population,” said **JOHN R. FERNANDEZ**, president and CEO of Lifespan. ❖

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## Legorreta Cancer Center at Brown announces 2023 Pilot grant recipients

PROVIDENCE [BROWN UNIVERSITY] – The Legorreta Cancer Center at Brown University announces the awardees of the 2023 Pilot grant competition. These one-year awards were made after applications were received from throughout Brown University and affiliated hospitals. The goal of the request for pilot grant applications was to encourage collaboration and basic-translational research across the academic medical center and within the Legorreta Cancer Center’s research programs in Cancer Biology, Cancer Therapeutics, and Population Science. In addition, a special request was made for projects addressing the role of nutrition, metabolism, and cancer. Two progress reports are expected from the awardees (at six months and at the end of the award) who will also be invited to present updates of their research at Cancer Center venues. ❖

Below is a list of the projects that have been approved for funding:

### **MORGANNE A. KAINES, PhD**

Assistant Professor (Research)  
Department of Psychiatry and Human Behavior  
Butler Hospital

**Project Title:** Adapting ‘Finding Peace in a Frantic World’ for Caregivers of Cancer Patients: A Qualitative Study

### **JOANNE WILKINSON, MD**

Associate Professor (Research)  
Department of Family Medicine  
Kent County Memorial Hospital

**Project Title:** Exploring and Improving Psychological Distress Related to Abnormal Mammograms

### **AMANDA M. JAMIESON, PhD**

Associate Professor  
Molecular Microbiology and Immunology

**Project Title:** Fighting Lung Cancer by controlling the respiratory microbiota

### **KARL T. KELSEY, MD**

Professor  
Pathology & Laboratory Medicine, Epidemiology

**Project Title:** Immune Cell Profiling in Response to Immunotherapy

### **MAMIKO YAJIMA, PhD**

Assistant Professor  
Molecular Biology, Cell Biology and Biochemistry

**Project Title:** Functional Contribution of DDX4 in small cell lung cancer regulation

### **OLIN LIANG, PhD**

Associate Professor (Research)  
Medicine

**Project Title:** Enabling CAR T Cell Immunotherapy in Glioblastoma by Modifying Tumor Microenvironment via Oncolytic Adenoviruses Encoding Bi-specific T Cell Engagers

### **BENEDITO A. CARNEIRO, MD, MS**

Associate Professor of Medicine

### **SHAOLEI LU, MD, PhD**

Associate Professor  
Pathology & Laboratory Medicine

**Project Title:** Investigating cellular Senescence as a mechanism of treatment resistance in prostate cancer

## Whitehouse applauds federal expansion of opioid treatment rules, calls for passage of TREATS Act

WASHINGTON, D.C. – U.S. Senator **SHELDON WHITEHOUSE** (D-RI) cheered the Biden administration's new rule extending Covid-era policies that expanded access to medication-assisted treatment initiated at Opioid Treatment Programs (OPTs). The rule change allows methadone and buprenorphine to be administered at home and ends a yearlong requirement of opioid addiction before entering treatment. These changes, which take effect on April 2, mark the first time in 20 years that the federal OPT rules have been updated.

"I applaud the Biden administration's efforts to expand access to opioid treatment and support individuals from all walks of life on the noble road to recovery," said Whitehouse, who authored the bipartisan Comprehensive Addiction and Recovery Act, the primary law guiding the federal response to the opioid epidemic. "This new rule marks an important step in our fight against the opioid epidemic, and passing my TREATS Act would expand access to buprenorphine across all health care settings. HHS has taken the first step, but more work is needed to ensure that everyone who wants recovery support can access it."

Last November, Whitehouse reintroduced the Telehealth Response for E-prescribing Addiction Therapy Services (TREATS) Act to increase access to medication for substance use disorder through telehealth. The bipartisan legislation will waive regulatory restrictions for accessing care, preserving flexibilities put in place to save lives during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Overdose deaths involving opioids rose to a peak of nearly 83,000 Americans in 2022. Last year, 434 Rhode Islanders died of accidental overdoses. Despite strong evidence that medication is the most effective treatment for opioid use disorder, only one in five Americans with opioid addiction receive medication treatment that could help them quit and stay in recovery.

During the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency, the Drug Enforcement Agency and the Department of Health and Human Services temporarily removed the in-person exam requirement for prescribing medication via telemedicine for people with opioid use disorder. Telehealth flexibilities helped a broad range of patients – including veterans, those living in rural areas, people experiencing homelessness, individuals in the criminal justice system, and racial and ethnic minorities – access treatment. The flexibilities are set to expire on December 31, 2024.

The TREATS Act would make the changes permanent, allowing providers to waive the in-person visit requirement and instead use audio-only or audio-visual telehealth technology. ❖

## BCBSRI, School of Public Health launch 6th annual RI Life Index

PROVIDENCE – Beginning in early March, Rhode Islanders will once again be asked at random to participate in an annual telephone survey for the RI Life Index. Now entering its 6th year, the Index captures Rhode Islanders' perceptions of a wide range of social and economic factors that contribute to health and well-being.

Survey topics include affordable housing, food security, cost of living, job opportunities, childcare, education, and other social determinants of health. The results are used to update the Index every year, providing both a detailed current portrait of how Rhode Islanders view their quality of life as well as emerging and evolving trend lines in the challenges they face.

Blue Cross & Blue Shield of Rhode Island (BCBSRI) created the Index in 2019 in partnership with the Brown University School of Public Health. The annual results have significantly informed BCBSRI's philanthropy, including more than \$8 million in investments in recent years in community initiatives focused on the nexus of affordable housing and health.

"The RI Life Index is strategically designed to capture the voices of ALL Rhode Islanders by ensuring that we hear from people of color, underrepresented urban neighborhoods, and other traditionally marginalized groups. We urge you to take part if you're contacted so that the Index continues to reflect the collective voices of our diverse communities," said **MICHELE LEDERBERG**, BCBSRI executive vice president, chief legal officer & chief administrative officer. "Thanks to Rhode Islanders who have responded to the survey every year since its launch, the Index continues to shine the light on unacceptable health inequities and serve as a valuable resource for researchers, policymakers, and community-based organizations devoted to eliminating these disparities."

The random digit dial survey will again be conducted in both English and Spanish, by Siena College Research Institute. The survey will continue through May, with results expected to be released to the community in fall 2024.

The survey is guided by the RI Life Index Coalition, a group of 14 community and statewide organizations working through an equity lens to address social needs and improve health. Member organizations include AARP; BCBSRI; Brown University School of Public Health; Community Provider Network of Rhode Island; the Economic Progress Institute; HousingWorks RI; Latino Policy Institute; Lifespan Community Health Institute; MLBP; Rhode Island Community Food Bank; the Rhode Island Department of Health; the Rhode Island Foundation; Rhode Island Kids Count; and United Way of Rhode Island.

"We are extremely grateful to Brown and our community partners, whose support has been critical in allowing us to launch the RI Life Index for a sixth consecutive year," Lederberg said.

For more information, visit [RILifeIndex.org](http://RILifeIndex.org). ❖



## BCBSRI grants \$75K to Chris Collins Foundation's school mental-health programs

PROVIDENCE – Blue Cross & Blue Shield of Rhode Island (BCBSRI), as part of its multi-pronged effort to address the youth behavioral health crisis in Rhode Island, has granted \$75,000 to The Chris Collins Foundation. The foundation, based in Rhode Island, administers school-based programs that raise awareness of mental health challenges in youth, reduce social stigma, and promote early interventions for students experiencing emotional difficulties.

The grant comes as the foundation is poised to expand its Peer-to-Peer Mental Health Awareness Program, a student-led, evidenced based initiative currently operating in 10 high schools and five middle schools in Rhode Island. The foundation is in the process of establishing the program at another six schools, positively impacting more than 10,000 students across the state.

"The Chris Collins Foundation is doing remarkable work in our schools to reduce the stigma of mental illness and encourage kids who are struggling to seek help. At a time when there are not enough mental health professionals to support all kids who need help, this peer-to-peer program harnesses the power of kids to normalize mental health conversations," said **MARTHA L. WOFFORD**, president and CEO of BCBSRI. "Our grant will help more students benefit from the foundation's program as part of our efforts to expand access to mental health treatment and evidence-based school and community programs."

The grant was announced at BCBSRI's annual all-associate summit on Jan. 30, during which foundation founder **MARK COLLINS** was invited to take the stage for a panel discussion on youth mental health. He was joined by keynote speaker and child and adolescent psychiatric expert **HENRY T. SACHS III, MD**, president of Bradley Hospital, and **SARAH FLEURY**, BCBSRI managing director for behavioral health.

Collins' son, Chris, attended South Kingstown schools and died by suicide at 20 after struggling for several years with anxiety and depression. "Chris was open about his illness and was a tremendous support to others who were struggling," said Collins. His family established the foundation in his name to continue his selfless legacy of care and concern for others. Understanding that the middle school and high school years are when signs of mental health challenges often first emerge, the foundation partnered with the University of Michigan Depression Center to bring its evidence-based, student-led Peer-to-Peer program to Rhode Island. The program, based on the idea that teens are more likely to listen to other teens than to well-meaning adults, emphasizes fighting stigma and seeking help when needed.

"This grant will help us to continue expanding this essential Peer-to-Peer program to more schools in Rhode Island and spread the message that it's okay to share that you are struggling and to get the help you need. Chris' love for his family and

friends was endless. Anyone who met him felt heard and seen. All this lives on through his foundation," Collins said. "We commend Blue Cross & Blue Shield for stepping up to play an active role in responding to the state's youth mental health crisis and we're grateful for its generous gift."

BCBSRI is working comprehensively to address youth mental health in Rhode Island, with a goal of positively impacting the behavioral health of 110,000 children and adolescents from 2023–2025. Efforts include:

- Committing to invest \$1.06 million to Rhode Island Student Assistance Services (RISAS) to support its school-based substance abuse prevention and mental health program, Project SUCCESS.
- Expanding funding for urgent access appointments
- Partnering to train providers in evidence-based care
- Embedding community health workers in PCP offices
- Training youth organizations in mental health first aid
- Enhancing access to care by partnering with virtual care providers
- Producing a new parent's guide to mental healthcare in Rhode Island, "Finding Help for Kids and Teens." ❖

## Bradley announces telehealth platform collaboration for students in mental-health crisis situations

PROVIDENCE – Bradley Hospital announced this week a first-of-its-kind collaboration with Cartwheel, a Boston-based telehealth platform helping school districts tackle the student mental health crisis. Available today to 200,000 students in more than 50 school districts across Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Connecticut, the collaboration allows school counselors to refer students in crisis rapidly to a higher level of care through the Bradley REACH virtual Partial Hospitalization Program (PHP).

Cartwheel already provides outpatient therapy and psychiatry services via telehealth for a range of common mental health needs. Now, students will also have access to more intensive support through Bradley's fully virtual program that allows teens to get the psychiatric care they need in their own homes.

The program works as a step-up for students who are struggling in outpatient care, and as a step-down following an Emergency Department visit or hospital stay. It lasts six and a half hours a day, Monday through Friday, and consists of individual, group and family therapy, and tutoring to keep up with school work. Patients can stay in the program as long as they need to, with the length of stay averaging three to four weeks. Bradley REACH provides care for adolescents ages 13 to 18 experiencing a wide range of issues and conditions, including depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation and self-harm. The evidence-based model provides individualized care that meets children and families where they are.

"When a student is facing an acute mental health need, school districts and families often struggle to find effective and timely support. But most telehealth solutions can't safely serve students in crisis. We're thrilled to now offer schools working with Cartwheel seamless access to Bradley REACH's virtual partial hospitalization program," said **JULIANA CHEN, MD**, Cartwheel's chief medical officer and board-certified child-adolescent psychiatrist. The program further advances Cartwheel's mission to be the trusted mental health partner to schools.

"Bradley REACH is committed to increasing access to high-quality, intensive behavioral health support for adolescents in need. We take a tailored approach to care that results in significant improvements for our patients and families and a flexible and safe environment that drives better outcomes," said **ELLEN HALLSWORTH**, Director of Bradley REACH. "Partnering with Cartwheel allows us to strengthen school districts' ability to get students the right care where and when they need it most and avoid future hospitalization."

Due to a well-documented shortage of care providers, schools are taking the lead on providing mental health support for students. But more severe mental health challenges, such as self-harming behaviors and suicidal ideation, require more intensive support. Students will now be able to access this support through the Bradley REACH Partial Hospitalization Program. ❖