

Impact REPORT 2025



Mental Health Association of Rhode Island
An Affiliate of Mental Health America

SINCE 1916

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Table of Contents

Message From the Executive Director -----	3
Together, We Open Doors -----	4
MHARI's Mission and Work -----	5
Why This Work Matters -----	6
Opening More Doors to Care -----	7
Mobilizing Collective Action -----	8
Supporting 200,000 People With Disabilities -----	9
Amplifying the Voices of Lived Experience -----	10
Empowering Consumer Advisory Councils -----	11
Opening Pathways to Youth Mental Health Supports -----	12
Meeting Rhode Islanders Where They Are -----	13
Kicking Off Mental Health Month at the State House -----	14
Staff -----	16
Board of Directors -----	18
Special Thanks to Our Philanthropic Partners -----	19
Contact Information -----	20

Message from the Executive Director

Every day, I am reminded why MHARI exists: children waiting months for care; teens in crisis sitting for hours in emergency departments; adults with depression unable to find an open provider; older adults stuck in hospitals due to a lack of community supports; and people with serious mental illness living in shelters because supportive housing is unavailable. These are not abstractions; they mirror the lived reality of thousands of Rhode Islanders who deserve better.

As someone with lived experience, I know how transformative timely, compassionate, and affordable care can be. That understanding drives my commitment, even when the work feels overwhelming. MHARI is small — just three full-time staff — but we persist. Advocacy means showing up, pushing for change, and organizing others to move farther together than any of us could alone.

This past year, our collective action led to real progress. When a federal lawsuit jeopardized Section 504 protections, we convened partners and helped secure those rights in state law. We strengthened collaboration, uplifted lived experience, supported youth and families, and advanced policies that expand access to care — achievements reflected throughout this report.

The year ahead will test us. Federal funding cuts and a projected \$300 million state budget deficit will strain an already fragile behavioral health system. But I remain hopeful — because progress has always come from ordinary people refusing to give up. I invite you to join us: share your story, speak up, attend a meeting, write to your legislators, or simply stay connected. **Together, we can continue turning lived experience into lasting change — and ensure that every Rhode Islander has access to the care and support they need to live with stability, dignity, and the highest possible quality of life.**

With gratitude,

Laurie-Marie Pisciotta
Executive Director

Together, We Open Doors.

This work is only possible because of you. Your generosity fuels a movement for fairness, dignity, and access to mental health care across Rhode Island. Every gift — large or small — helps people share their stories, influence policy, and open doors to care that might otherwise remain closed.

We are committed to using every dollar wisely. This year, more than 61% of spending directly supported the dedicated staff who carry out our mission every day, with the remaining funds covering benefits, program needs, and essential operating expenses. Your investment strengthens the people and partnerships that move this work forward.

Thank you for believing in this mission and for standing with us during a year of challenge and change. Your support ensures that hope, advocacy, and compassion remain at the heart of Rhode Island's mental health system.

You Make a
DIFFERENCE.



Make a Gift Today.

MHARI's Mission and Work

The Mental Health Association of Rhode Island (MHARI) is a private, consumer-focused advocacy organization dedicated to improving mental health for all Rhode Islanders through policy development, education, and coalition building. We champion equitable access to timely, quality, and affordable mental and behavioral health services, and we amplify the voices of people with lived experience to drive system-wide change.

MHARI addresses the root causes of barriers to care — including insurance and Medicaid coverage, long waitlists, social drivers of health, and mental health literacy — while bringing together state and community partners to advance innovative, lasting solutions.

Our legacy began in 1916 as the Rhode Island chapter of the National Committee for Mental Hygiene, founded by Clifford Beers, a pioneer of mental health reform whose lived experience ignited a national movement. Today, MHARI continues this work by ensuring that policy reflects the needs and dignity of those it serves. We play an active role in shaping the state's behavioral health priorities as an appointed member of the Governor's Council on Behavioral Health and the Office of the Health Insurance Commissioner's Health Insurance Advisory Council.

Collaboration is central to our impact. MHARI founded and convenes the Parity/Behavioral Health Advocacy Coalition and chairs the Olmstead Subcommittee of the Governor's Council on Behavioral Health. This work brings together leaders from community organizations, state agencies, and healthcare providers — including CODAC Behavioral Health; NAMI RI; RIPIN; Thrive Behavioral Health; Newport Mental Health; Thundermist Health Center; the RI Office of the Mental Health Advocate; and many others — to strengthen the continuum of care and protect the rights of Rhode Islanders living with mental health conditions.

Why This Work Matters

Mental health challenges touch nearly every Rhode Island family, yet too many people still face long waitlists, high costs, limited coverage, and services that are difficult to navigate. Policy and advocacy shape the systems that determine whether someone receives timely care — or goes without it. By strengthening laws, protecting rights, elevating lived experience, and bringing partners together to solve problems, MHARI works to ensure that every Rhode Islander has a fair chance at mental health and well-being. When systems change, lives change.

IN RHODE ISLAND...

216,000 people live with a mental illness.

105 people were lost to suicide in 2024.

50% of mental illnesses begin by **age 14**, yet only **23%** of high school students feel they receive the help they need.

16,000 adolescents experience a major depressive episode each year.

15-20% of incarcerated individuals live with a mental illness.

These numbers are not abstract. They represent Rhode Island children, adults, and families — people whose lives and futures depend on timely, affordable, and quality care. Every statistic is a story, and every story is a reminder of why we must turn compassion into action.

Opening More Doors to Care



Mental health parity laws require insurance companies to cover mental health and substance use disorder treatment at the same level as physical health care. Without strong enforcement, insurers can restrict access by offering low reimbursement rates that limit in-network providers, delaying care through burdensome prior authorizations, or denying services based on narrow definitions of “medically necessary.” These practices prevent Rhode Islanders from receiving timely, evidence-based care.

This year, MHARI partnered with Brown University’s Policy Initiative to examine how stagnant reimbursement rates contribute to Rhode Island’s provider shortage. The study found that low rates, administrative barriers, and a shift toward private-pay models make it difficult for many Rhode Islanders – especially Medicaid enrollees – to access in-network behavioral health care. As demand rises, these challenges widen gaps in access and disproportionately affect those with the fewest resources.

MHARI’s Parity/Behavioral Health Advocacy Coalition is advancing reforms to close these gaps by increasing reimbursement rates to attract and retain providers, eliminating prior authorization for in-network behavioral health services, and strengthening state standards so clinicians – not insurers – determine what care is medically necessary. Together, these measures would help ensure Rhode Islanders receive the care they need, when they need it.

MHARI continues to elevate parity issues statewide. Our Executive Director serves on the Office of the Health Insurance Commissioner’s Health Insurance Advisory Council and, in January 2025, spoke at Butler Hospital alongside Rhode Island’s Congressional delegation to highlight how Medicaid benefits are a lifeline for thousands who rely on behavioral health services. Her remarks received statewide news coverage.

Mobilizing Collective Action:

Where Community Priorities Drive Policy Change



In 2022, MHARI founded the **Parity/Behavioral Health Advocacy Coalition** to unite community partners, people with lived experience, and behavioral health professionals around shared priorities. Each year, the coalition identifies key policy issues, develops strategic plans, and advocates with a unified voice at the State House. Below are this year's legislative priorities and outcomes.

2025 Legislative Outcomes: At a Glance

Protecting Disability Rights — Victory

A federal lawsuit threatens Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, which safeguards people with disabilities from discrimination. MHARI convened a statewide stakeholder committee, identified gaps in Rhode Island law, and helped draft legislation to protect those rights at the state level should federal protections be weakened. House Bill 6122 (Rep. Joseph McNamara) and Senate Bill 887 (Senator Alana DiMario) passed — securing essential **civil rights** in Rhode Island.

Preserving Community Integration — Victory

When the FY26 budget omitted funding for the EOHHS Olmstead Coordinator — a role critical to advancing community-based living for people with disabilities — MHARI mobilized partners and successfully advocated to restore funding. **\$150,000** was secured to retain the Coordinator and sustain Olmstead implementation.

Expanding Community-Based Behavioral Health — Victory

The FY26 budget included state support for Certified Community Behavioral Health Clinics (CCBHCs), which provide integrated primary and behavioral healthcare and 24/7 crisis services — a major step toward strengthening access to care.

Strengthening Youth & Maternal Mental Health — Victory

The FY26 budget funded the MomsPRN and PediPRN consultation helplines, ensuring that providers statewide can access psychiatric guidance for children and pregnant or postpartum parents — **improving early, equitable access to care.**

Monitoring Solitary Confinement — In Progress

Bills establishing an **oversight committee** to monitor solitary confinement and its mental health impacts were introduced and held for study, laying groundwork for future reform. (House Bill 5927 – Rep. Leonela Felix / Senate Bill 533 – Sen. Jonathon Acosta)

Retaining Behavioral Health Professionals — Priority for 2026

Legislation to raise reimbursement rates — essential to preventing provider loss **and reducing waitlists** — was held for study and will be reintroduced next session. (House Bill 5863 – Rep. Teresa Tanzi / Senate Bill 463 – Sen. Pamela Lauria)

Ending Prior Authorization Barriers — Priority for 2026

A bill to eliminate prior authorization for in-network behavioral health services **passed the House** but stalled in the Senate. MHARI will continue leading this effort in 2026. (House Bill 5432 – Rep. Teresa Tanzi / Senate Bill 54 – Sen. Linda Ujifusa)

Ensuring Medically Necessary Care — Priority for 2026

Legislation to strengthen state standards for determining medical necessity (House Bill 6061 – Rep. Teresa Tanzi / Senate Bill 193 – Sen. Linda Ujifusa) did not pass and remains a core priority to ensure patients receive **timely, evidence-based treatment.**

Supporting 200,000 People with Disabilities: Rhode Island's First Olmstead Plan



In 2024, Governor Daniel McKee established Rhode Island's Olmstead Advisory Group, paving the way for the state's first five-year Olmstead Plan. This roadmap outlines how **200,000** Rhode Islanders with disabilities can live, work, and receive services in the most integrated settings, as required by the U.S. Supreme Court's 1999 Olmstead v. L.C. decision. The plan prioritizes expanding access to supportive housing, transportation, education supports, home- and community-based services, assistive technology, and employment opportunities, while updating policies that create barriers to community living. The Advisory Group is now finalizing measurable goals to track progress over time.

MHARI plays a central role in this work. We successfully advocated for the establishment of the **Olmstead Advisory Group**, currently serve on it, and participate on its Behavioral Health Action Team. Since 2019, we have facilitated the **Olmstead Subcommittee of the Governor's Council on Behavioral Health**. Our sustained advocacy was instrumental in advancing the development of Rhode Island's first plan—an essential step for the nearly one in four Rhode Islanders living with a disability who too often face obstacles to housing, healthcare, and community inclusion.

The Olmstead Plan is more than a policy document; it affirms a commitment to dignity, independence, and equity. Its adoption marks a pivotal moment for Rhode Island and signals a future where people with disabilities have the support they need to live full lives in the communities they call home.

Amplifying the Voices of Lived Experience



Sharing personal stories is essential to advancing change — it humanizes complex issues and deepens understanding. This year, MHARI launched **Brave Voices, Bold Impact**, a collaborative training initiative that helps Rhode Islanders build the skills, confidence, and knowledge needed to speak up, shape policy, and advocate for stronger behavioral health and social supports. Participants learn to share their experiences authentically and compellingly when speaking with legislators, writing testimony, or advocating in their communities.

In 2026, MHARI and partners across Rhode Island will offer free in-person and virtual workshops that help community members:

- Understand the legislative process
- Share their stories effectively
- Communicate with lawmakers
- Build confidence in public speaking
- Navigate the state budget
- Take meaningful advocacy action
- Connect with others committed to change

Workshops are open to individuals with lived experience, caregivers, peer specialists, students, community leaders, and anyone who wants to make their voice heard. Collaborating organizations include Horizon Healthcare Partners, the Coalition Against Domestic Violence, Community Care Alliance, NAMI RI, the Economic Progress Institute, and others working to inspire courage and action.

Empowering Consumer Advisory Councils



In 2025, MHARI organized and facilitated Rhode Island’s first retreat for Consumer Advisory Council (CAC) leaders—bringing together representatives from the state’s eight newly launched Certified Community Behavioral Health Clinics (CCBHCs). CACs are composed of patients, family members, and clinic staff who elevate lived experience, shape internal policies, convey community needs, and strengthen patient satisfaction and outcomes.

The lunch-and-learn retreat gave CAC leaders their first opportunity to meet as a group, exchange ideas, and build practical skills. Together, we reviewed CAC responsibilities, discussed state and federal requirements, formalizing processes, and increasing influence within clinic leadership. Richard Leclerc, Director of the Department of Behavioral Health, Developmental Disabilities and Hospitals, joined the conversation and engaged in open dialogue with participants.

At the end of the retreat, CAC leaders agreed that ongoing collaboration and peer learning are valuable and committed to meeting regularly. They asked MHARI to convene a second retreat next year.

Opening Pathways to Youth Mental Health Supports



In 2025, MHARI's Youth Behavioral Health Liaison established a partnership with the Mood Check program at Brown University's Hassenfeld Child Health Innovation Institute, a screening and intervention initiative that connects at-risk students and their families to mental health resources. Through this partnership, MHARI helps families navigate Rhode Island's complex behavioral health system to access timely support. We also collaborated with the Rhode Island Department of Health and other partners to develop a statewide directory of adolescent behavioral health programs — a centralized resource that will be released publicly in the coming months.

Throughout the year, MHARI provided resources, guidance, and consultation to more than **150 educators**, presented at a local high school transition event, and participated in youth mental health gatherings across the state. The Youth Behavioral Health Liaison continues to assist families in urgent need by providing referrals and care coordination, facilitating access to appropriate services and reinforcing MHARI's commitment to promoting the behavioral health and well-being of young people and their communities.

Meeting Rhode Islanders Where They Are



MHARI supports the communities we serve by being present, listening deeply, and learning directly from Rhode Islanders. Throughout the year, we attended community events and festivals to share educational materials and gather feedback through brief surveys — giving people an accessible way to voice their mental health needs and priorities. MHARI also serves on the Mayor’s Council on Behavioral Health, ensuring that community perspectives shape education and public health policy discussions. Together, these efforts extend MHARI’s reach, amplify community voices, and advance our mission to promote mental health equity statewide.

Kicking off Mental Health Month at the State House



On May 6, 2025, MHARI hosted Rhode Island’s annual Mental Health Month celebration at the State House, bringing together state leaders, community partners, and advocates to elevate mental health as a public priority. The event opened with remarks from MHARI’s Executive Director, Laurie-Marie Pisciotta, followed by Richard Leclerc, Director of the Department of Behavioral Health, Developmental Disabilities and Hospitals, who underscored the importance of collaboration in strengthening the behavioral health system. Throughout the program, individuals with lived experience – Amanda Bradford, Ines Garcia, Sabrina Calvert, and Christian Núñez – shared powerful stories of hope and healing, reminding attendees that behind every policy decision is a real person seeking understanding, dignity, and care.

MHARI also recognized champions whose leadership and advocacy are advancing mental health in Rhode Island: NBC 10 News at Noon anchor Barbara Morse, recipient of the Lionheart Award for Fearless Mental Health Advocacy; Senator Louis P. DiPalma and Representative David A. Bennett, honored as Mental Health Legislators of the Year; and Michelle Taylor of Community Care Alliance, recognized as a Mental Health Hero. Together, the event honored courage, community, and collective action – and reaffirmed MHARI’s commitment to ensuring that every Rhode Islander has access to the support they need.

Staff



Laurie-Marie Pisciotto, Executive Director

Laurie-Marie brings more than two decades of nonprofit leadership to the Mental Health Association of Rhode Island. Her career spans policy, advocacy, and direct service, including roles as a lobbyist and policy analyst for the ACLU; Treatment Access Program Manager at Project HEAL; Director of Strategic Partnerships at NeedyMeds; case manager at AIDS Action Committee of Massachusetts; and a Court Appointed Special Advocate for children in foster care. Laurie-Marie's lived experience with mental illness informs her leadership and fuels her commitment to mental health equity. She is the 2024 recipient of Butler Hospital's Lila M. Sapinsley Community Service Award.



Terence "Terry" Charles, Director of Community Engagement & Operations

Terry brings more than 25 years of nonprofit leadership experience to the Mental Health Association of Rhode Island, including service as staff, board member, and Board President. A graduate of Rhode Island College with advanced coursework in marketing and sales, he has dedicated his career to building meaningful relationships and strengthening organizations that serve underserved and immigrant communities. As past Chair of the Progreso Latino Board, Terry helped guide the organization to its strongest fiscal position and widest community reach. His personal experience with anxiety reinforces his belief that accessible, effective mental health care is essential to community well-being. As MHARI's Director of Community Engagement, Terry works to cultivate partnerships and resources that advance this mission.

Who We Are Continued...



Laura Shank, LCSW, Youth Behavioral Health Liaison

Laura Shank is a licensed social worker whose experience spans nonprofit quality improvement, DCYF investigations, youth psychotherapy, and school-based behavioral health. She holds a bachelor's degree in Family and Human Development from Arizona State University and a master's degree in Social Work from Louisiana State University. Passionate about supporting youth and individuals with disabilities, Laura brings both professional and lived experience to her work, offering a grounded and empathetic perspective as MHARI's Youth Behavioral Health Liaison.

Consultants

Keri Ambrosino, Design by Keri
Francesca Raoelison, Founder of Omena

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Parent Support Network of Rhode Island
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RI Dept. of Behavioral Health, Developmental Disabilities & Hospitals
Rhode Island Foundation
Rhode Runner
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The Providence Center
Thrive Behavioral Health
Tides Family Services
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Support Our Work

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