

# RHODE ISLAND



T H E O C E A N S T A T E

An Excerpt  
Compliments of  
NRI Community  
Services Inc.

*An Illustrated History*  
George H. Kellner & J. Stanley Lemons

The following is an excerpt from *Rhode Island The Ocean State* by George H. Kellner & J. Stanley Lemons. Sun Valley, CA: American Historical Press, 2004, pgs. 232-233. (photos have been updated)

## NRI COMMUNITY SERVICES, INC.

NRI Community Services, Inc. was founded in 1966, just as federal and state legislation and public policy was shifting mental health services from institutional to community settings. For its first 15 years NRI, like most community mental health centers, was a relatively small nonprofit agency. Professional staff served diverse child and adult mental health problems in an office setting. Founders Dr. Edward P. Nolan, Viola M. Berard, and Dr. Frank D.E. Jones focused on providing mental health services to those who were least able to pay.

In 1981 NRI's nonprofit board of directors hired Christian L. Stephens as its executive director. Stephens' approach was significantly different from the highly professionalized approaches of the past. Based on his work experience with low income youth and adults in community mental health and corrections programs in New York and Vermont, Stephens collaborated with the board of directors to redesign NRI's services.

An advocacy-oriented board of directors was elected and home and community-based services were priori-

*The Singleton House in Burrillville, a group home for people with mental illness.*



tized. As part of the agency's new direction, a housing development subsidiary was formed, several job placement programs were initiated for clients, and an alternative school was started. Child and adult programs were refocused to concentrate more on the clients' goals rather than on their ailments. A more

*NRI Community Services, Inc.'s Cummings Way office offers acute and long-term outpatient services in Woonsocket.*

diverse workforce was also employed, which had a broader range and understanding of clients in all stages of recovery.

Through the efforts of an entrepreneurial-minded management team, funding and services were expanded. Alliances were made with a wide range of other organizations and arrangements for referrals were established. Involuntary hospitalizations were dramatically reduced as child and adult case management teams and a 24-hour crisis team intervened with clients. Substance abuse and violence intervention services were soon added as NRI merged other small nonprofit agencies into their organization. Finally, affiliated nonprofits were created to offer peer-provided services to families and people suffering from mental illness. The entire agency focused on individuals and groups in the community that were most "at-risk."

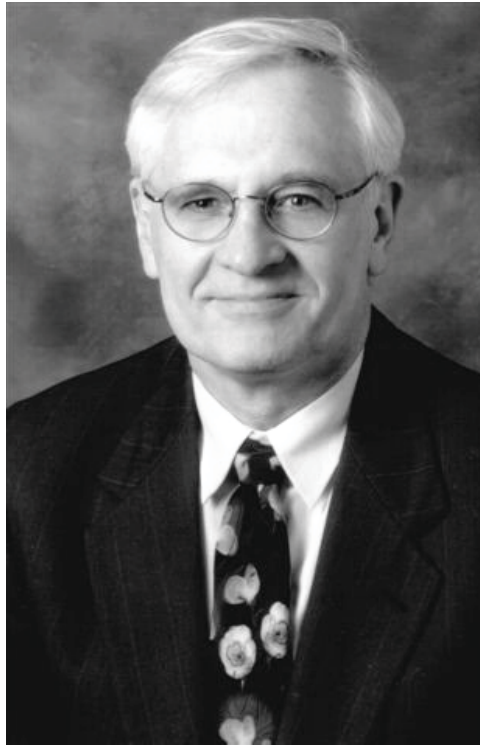
Today, nearly 40 years later, NRI Community Services (NRICS) is a significant small business in northern

Rhode Island. It supports 265 jobs, pays \$100,000 in property taxes, and has over a \$12 million a year economic impact on the communities it serves. Along the way, it has garnered numerous awards and recognitions for housing, employment, crisis, volunteer, mental health, substance abuse, and rehabilitation programs. Stephens has also earned recognition, including the Piepenbrink Award from the National Council of Community Behavioral Healthcare, for his professional contributions to the field of mental health administration.

“Like any other nonprofit health or human services organization, our business, succeeds because of the wealth of volunteer “stakeholders” that shepherd our resources and support our continuous efforts to improve our services,” says Stephens. “Furthermore, our diverse staff understands the impact that poverty, bias, and community violence has had on the children and adults we serve. They listen to their ‘customers’ and partner with them in their recovery.”

When Blackstone Valley Mental Health Realty Corporation was formed by NRICS in the 1980s, the Greater Woonsocket area was known for being home to several generations of refugee groups. This was due mostly to the availability of low cost rental housing. However, today Rhode Island has the fastest escalating housing prices in the United States—with one of the biggest gaps between income and housing costs. Rhode Island’s small size and environmentally-protected areas, coupled with dense population, have also made it the state with the lowest rate of new housing development. To make the housing problem even more of a challenge, affluent commuters who work in the Greater Boston area occupy many units nearby, contributing to Rhode Island’s very low vacancy rates.

NRI Community Services and Blackstone Valley Mental Health Realty Corporation have been a force in Rhode Island and created affordable housing for many of those most in need. In approximately 20 different location in six cities and towns, nearly 140 housing units have been created for mental health and substance abuse clients. Group homes, supervised apartments, supported apartments, halfway houses,



*Christian L. Stephens, President and CEO*

independent living apartments, sober houses, and a planned assisted living facility provide specialized resources for people with HIV, those in recovery or who suffer from mental illness, and

most often, people with some combination of aging, disability, and trauma that makes them at greater risk for relapse and homelessness. The efforts of these two organizations to tackle the state’s housing crisis has established them as national leaders in the field of “supported housing.”

Currently, federal policy pronouncements from the Center for Mental Health Services assert that the future of mental health and substance abuse services will be in “creating housing, employment, self-help, and peer support services that empower clients in their recovery.” NRI Community Services is heeding this declaration, and working to provide the most progressive and effective programs possible. It is excelling at its mission because its clients, board, and staff have taken a common sense approach to improving community mental health services. The agency takes its responsibility to Rhode Islanders very seriously—an attitude that is highly-regarded throughout the state.

*The Sadwin Apartments provide independent and supervised units in Woonsocket.*

