

Immigration Enforcement and Public Schools

As RI settles into another school year, the nation continues to deal with a summer marked by news stories of detention camps, family separations and protests in response to the Trump administration's immigration policies.

According to the American Immigration Council, RI has a large immigrant population, including many immigrants from the Dominican Republic — 30,000 undocumented immigrants comprised 21% of the immigrant population and 2.9% of the total state population in 2014. It further reports that 37,475 people in Rhode Island, including 14,507 born in the US, lived with at least one undocumented family member between 2010 and 2014.

Local political leaders, including in Providence and Cranston, two of the state's largest cities, have publicly made comments related to US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and the policies that they would follow with regard to the organization's tactics.

Providence Mayor Jorge Elorza has made comments over the past year and a half that indicate his resistance to cooperation with ICE. Last month, Providence joined Central Falls and other cities in a lawsuit over immigration-related requirements for law enforcement agencies, [according to WPRI](#).

In Cranston, Mayor Allan Fung, the Republican candidate for governor, has said publicly that he plans to "expand the role" of his city's police department in identifying individuals to ICE. The move drew criticism from activist organizations and protests outside his office last month.

But how do ICE tactics affect students in our state? Children have a right to a public K-12 education, which is afforded them regardless of immigration status. This right was determined in the 1982 Supreme Court case, *Plyler vs. Doe*, during which the court struck down state and municipal provisions in Texas that attempted to deny educational funding and charge for the loss of funding, respectively.

The Providence Public Schools told *Motif* that they do not have a specific policy with regard to undocumented immigrant students and families, but adheres to federal regulations.

"Providence Public Schools are committed to providing a supportive and welcoming educational environment for all our students, regardless of their immigration status," Laura Hart, director of communications for the Providence Public Schools, said in an emailed statement.

"Federal law states that undocumented children have the same rights to public education as students who are US citizens," Hart wrote. "It also states that we cannot require students to reveal their status. As such, we rely on community partners to provide supports specific to immigration issues."

In Cranston, Mark Schieldrop, a spokesman for the city, told *Motif* that ICE receives notification when someone who is here illegally is arrested by Cranston Police; however, Cranston schools operate independently and are not controlled by the city. He directed questions about school policy to the public school district.

In February 2017, *The Providence Journal* [reported](#) that school officials in some RI towns, such as Central Falls, vowed to protect students, and held Know Your Rights sessions aimed at helping the RI

immigrant community prepare for interactions with immigration enforcement agencies or discrimination.

A Rhode Island Department of Education [document](#) dated September 12, 2017, states that schools should have a plan or procedure in place for school personnel. The document notes that student information is protected by the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) and repeatedly notes that districts are locally responsible for policies and actions related to immigration enforcement agencies and the students for which the districts are responsible.

“If ICE officials request to speak with students, schools need to ensure that there is a warrant, court order, exigent circumstances or consent provided by a parent or proxy consistent with a school district policy,” the document states.

At press time, Cranston public school representatives could not be reached for comment.

TedX Providence Returns

In October, the popular TED Talk will get its own Rhode Island flavor when TEDxProvidence takes place for the seventh time.

Slated for October 13, the event is expected to draw more than 1,000 people. Although the Ted Conference provides general guidance, TEDx events are organized locally and independently managed, meant to provide a similar event to the TED Talks that have gained popularity online since 2006.

Michael Gazdacko is the license holder for this year’s event. He told *Motif* that this year is his first as the license holder from TED — “It is a little bit of a learning experience,” he said — but he has been involved with the Providence event’s organizing committee for several years. He is also chairman of the Providence Speaking Society.

“This year we will have a special sponsorship from Infosys that will bring some interesting interactive art displays, chill spaces and performers,” Gazdacko said. The event is additionally sponsored by the Rhode Island Foundation.

No speakers are currently scheduled, though speaker nominations closed in April, but Gazdacko noted that the event is centered on the theme *The Time Is Now*. Last year’s speakers included representatives from a variety of disciplines, including artists, activists, entrepreneurs and educators. Senator Sheldon Whitehouse was also a speaker at last year’s event.

“The goal of the conference is to allow the speakers to capture the zeitgeist of our time around their specific areas of expertise,” he said. “The talks are always unique and each year tend to surprise even the organizers in their breadth and originality.”

TedXProvidence will take place at the Vets Auditorium on the Avenue of the Arts in Providence on Saturday, October 13 at 10am.

LIHEAP Helps People Weather Life's Storms

Though the winter months are over, there is a national program aimed at ensuring that low-income households retain heat and other energy resources throughout the year through federal funding. LIHEAP, the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program, is a national program administered by the Department of Health and Human Services.

According to the Health and Human Services website, the program can help pay for bills related to home energy, energy crises and weatherization or energy-related minor home repairs. The program is administered throughout the country by local outpost offices that work to distribute funds and receive applications from local residents. The regional distribution model has increased jurisdiction over how funds are given out and what rules for applications and eligibility.

In Rhode Island, there are two main prongs of the assistance: primary grants, which are sent directly to a family's energy provider, and crisis assistance, which addresses energy emergencies, like having a quarter of a fuel tank or less or facing utility service termination.

Those who qualify do not need to have an unpaid heating bill, nor do they need to be recipients of other assistance programs, like SNAP. However, recipients of these benefits are included among those eligible to apply for LIHEAP.

Eligibility is based on income in Rhode Island. At the bottom of the scale, a one-person household must have a maximum income of \$28,533. Families who qualify for LIHEAP must have a total household income of 60% of the state median income or less. The maximum income level increases as the number of family members in the household increases. These values are adjusted each year. Renters and homeowners alike are eligible; however, there is no guarantee that all applicants will receive benefits.

Because the program is federally funded, money is distributed to states' local LIHEAP offices, which manage the distribution of the funds. Ordinarily, programs like this are governed by specific guidelines stipulated by the federal government. However, LIHEAP is an exception to this: The program can be administered under guidelines laid out by the regional offices themselves, which means that eligibility, distribution and other factors often vary, depending on a person's place of residence.

Rhode Island residents can apply for LIHEAP benefits online at the Rhode Island branch's website.

InvestiGATE: Sunshine Week

Each March, journalists and freedom of information advocates mark Sunshine Week.

Sunshine Week, so named because of the Sunshine Act, celebrates freedom of information and encourages communities to understand the public's right to government information. It is celebrated through activities and events, which are often hosted by nonprofits, libraries and news organizations.

In the Sunshine Act, passed in 1976, the federal government legislated necessary reporting for federal agencies. It falls under the wide umbrella of Freedom of Information acts, which can vary from state to state.

In Rhode Island, freedom of information is legislated on the state level by the Access to Public Records Act, passed in 1979. The Open Meetings Act is also a freedom of information act, which protects the public's right to access government meetings.

These acts allow private citizens, including journalists, activists and others, to file freedom of information requests (frequently referred to as FOIA requests; in Rhode Island, these are called APRA (Access to Public Records Act) requests). Requests are typically made to the governing body that has control over a request's content. Federal, state and local governments fulfill their own requests.

However, requests can sometimes take months, even years, to fill, and can be heavily redacted if they are. There are often exceptions to the types of information that can be requested and/or released under the act. In Rhode Island, there are a variety of exceptions, including law enforcement records, tax returns, library records and collective bargaining negotiations.

The Rhode Island attorney general's office keeps a record of yearly reports detailing open government-related statistics and information. This data includes numbers of violations and complaints received in reference to both the Open Meetings Act and APRA. Each complaint that resulted in a violation has a brief summary included in the report.

In 2017, the report stated that 51 APRA complaints were received and 17 violations were found. These violations included complaints in Glocester, Burrillville, Johnston, East Providence, Providence, Coventry, Western Coventry, Pawtucket and Tiverton, as well as several complaints against state agencies or boards.

One violation, in North Kingstown, resulted in a lawsuit. FOR WHAT?

Seventy-one complaints were filed in regard to the Open Meetings Act, and 11 violations were found in Coventry, Western Coventry, Chariho, West Warwick, Scituate, Central Coventry, North Kingstown, South Kingstown, Woonsocket and North Smithfield. No lawsuits were filed under found violations, according to the 2017 report.

The attorney general's website includes a link to a request form that can be used to fill out a request. Complaints are emailed to the attorney general's office.

InvestiGATE: The Relationship between Public and Charter Schools

There are 299 primary and secondary schools in Rhode Island, a combination of traditional public schools, charter schools, state-operated schools and a handful of other institutions listed on the state's reporting. This excludes private schools and other types of alternative educational institutions.

According to the Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE), there are 30 charter schools, which fall under three different subtypes of schools. There are district charter schools, which are "created by existing public schools, groups of public school personnel, public school districts or a group of school districts." There are mayoral academies, which are created by a mayor of any city or town, acting by or through a nonprofit, "regardless of the time said nonprofit organization is in existence."

Independent charter schools, as most of the state's charters are classified, are created by either RI nonprofit organizations or colleges or universities in the state. If a nonprofit organization is to start a charter, the organization must exist for a "substantial reason other than to operate a school."

Keith Oliveira, the executive director of the Rhode Island League of Charter Schools, told *Motif* that there has always been criticism of charter schools. This criticism is rooted in the charge that charter schools take funding away from public school districts.



Keith Oliveira

Charter schools, while sanctioned by the state government, which provides the school with its “charter” to exist, operate autonomously from the traditional policies of a public school system. This is ostensibly to allow them increased freedom in adjusting curricula to its student body’s needs.

Oliveira explained that a charter school is able to design curricula based on student data on skill levels and to make adjustments, such as hiring more specialists, to meet student educational needs. These schools use data to “have a better idea of who [the schools’] kids are.”

Oliveira also noted that while they operate autonomously, these schools are beholden to state and national standards like Common Core.

The money that flows into charter schools and away from public schools is attached to its individual students, Oliveira said. “I would argue that money is entitled to the student,” he said.

The entitlement to that money was never the district’s, but rather is attached to the student’s right to a “free and appropriate public education,” which he said a charter school can provide.

However, the criticism that these schools take money away from public schools is one that Lawrence Purtill, the president of the National Education Association of Rhode Island, says holds water.

The money does indeed follow the student, he confirmed. “On the surface, that makes sense,” Purtill said.

However, when students move out of a public school district into a charter school, he said, they take their per-pupil funding with them. If a student is arbitrarily valued at \$10,000, which would hypothetically cover the cost of educating that student, that is the amount that flows from the traditional public school to the charter school when the student leaves.

If 100 students leave a traditional public school for a charter school in this example, Mr. Purtill said, that is worth \$1 million. However, the public school is not going to save \$1 million when these students leave, as the overhead costs of educating the students that remain, and the cost of operating the school, do not equate to a one-to-one ratio.

The overall cost of education is not tied directly to the per-student cost of education, and therefore when a student leaves, the proportionate loss of funding that results in can negatively impact a public school and the remaining students, he said.

“Schools are going to have to make decisions about cutting programs and I don’t think that helps anybody,” he said. “It’s not the fantasy that some people think it is.”

Additionally, charter schools often have what Purtill called “deep pockets,” which can result in more funding for these schools to operate. He stated that from a practical point of view, the question is fundamentally about extending the same opportunities to all students.

“I’d like to see the money going to help all students, not just some,” he said. Purtill stated that he is not opposed to the idea of charters overall, however, and expressed support for their “original purpose.” His criticism is based mainly on the idea of charter schools that act essentially as “parallel schools,” which do most of what traditional public schools are already doing, he said.

Each year, the state publishes “report cards” for each school. These report cards include several pieces

of information about the school's graduation rate, attendance rate and other data points. It also reports percent proficiencies for reading and math at each school.

The percent proficiency rates are based on Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, a standardized test administered in RI schools. The figures represent the percentage of students who are performing at or above the goal level for their grade. Beginning this year, Rhode Island will begin reporting from the Rhode Island Comprehensive Assessment System (RICAS) for third through eighth grades, and using the PSATs and SATs for high school, according to Megan Geoghegan, communications officer at RIDE.

Based on data collected from these report cards from the '16 - '17 school year, charter schools and public schools perform at roughly the same percentage rates in both math and reading on average. Public schools have a five percentage point edge over independent charter schools in math.

When considering this data, it is important to note that traditional public schools outnumber charter schools by a 9 to 1 ratio.

For example, the Blackstone Valley Prep Mayoral Academy, a charter school located in Pawtucket, reports that its reading percent proficiency for its student body is 67.5. Its math proficiency is 50%.

Blackstone Valley Prep Mayoral Academy is a high school, and has been operating since 2014. It draws students from Cumberland, Central Falls, Lincoln and Pawtucket.

The percent proficiencies reported in these districts' public high schools range dramatically, with Blackstone Valley Prep reporting about 10% higher than the top-performing public school in these districts, Lincoln Senior High School, which reported reading at 48.9% and math at 44.5%.

Because of the large number of schools in Rhode Island, this data, like all data, can be misleading. It is important to try to compare these schools' performances in context, with attention paid to progress made within a school or district, a school's student experience and external factors that may influence student performance.

Purtill noted that students see educational advantage when there are certain external factors that have correlation to higher performances, such as parental involvement. Not all families can provide the same level of involvement or extra-curricular learning, which can impact the data point that represents that student.

Additionally, students whose families live below the poverty line often experience educational disadvantages that impact their overall student experience. Systems, funding and programs have to exist to help these students, Purtill said.

To this point, the data reflects educational differences, not just between charter and traditional public schools, but dramatic differences exist from district to district within the traditional public school arrangement.

A traditionally more affluent area, such as North Kingstown, seems to perform at higher rates than an area with more people living at or below the poverty line, like Providence. Because schools are funded through a variety of different state and local sources, the relative wealth of a school can impact a student's experience because of the school's ability to hire teachers, buy updated textbooks and provide

students with other educational opportunities.

This is Purtil's point when he addresses the fact that a student in a charter school's monetary value can go further at a smaller school, which has less students to educate and, potentially, a deeper well from which to draw financially.

However, Oliveira states that charter schools can provide students with innovative educational methods or more specialized attention.

"Our obligation as a society [is] to be investing in the education of our kids," he said. Charter schools can do that, Oliveira argues.

Purtill counters this, saying that the problem with parallel schools is that they draw students away from traditional public schools while also providing much of the same resources that a public school might. "We're not opposed to the concept of charter schools," he said, noting their value if they are able to try different methods to reach students who may need particular help.

At the center of both arguments, however, remain the students. The student experience is shaped by a variety of factors, some external to the school itself, and many which cannot be plotted with data. Determining the worth of a particular style of education is a larger equation than can be hashed out with graphs; the weight of each student weighs more heavily than any dataset could.

[Where the Chickens Come Home to Roost](#)

Eight years ago, **Steve Stycos** of the Cranston City Council proposed an ordinance to allow chickens to be kept in backyard areas by residents. The ordinance passed through the council, but was eventually vetoed by Mayor **Alan Fung** and the council couldn't gather enough votes to override it.

In the intervening years, there has been some confusion over the veto's actual effect. Currently, under Cranston ordinance, residents are allowed to keep chickens; however, according to **Drake Patten**, head farmer at **Cluck!**, many have believed that the veto made the practice a violation of city regulations.

Title Six of the Cranston municipal code makes specific stipulations regarding swine animals and horses, as well as regulations related to the keeping and hitching of animals. This is in line with Patten's assertion that the code does not regulate chickens or other birds and farm animals. However, according to Stycos, the code might be unclear on what is regulated and what is not.

"I think the language is somewhat unclear in city ordinances and I don't remember all the details," Stycos said. "...My best guess is the ordinances say you can keep farm animals in some zones and is silent on the other zones, implying that they are not allowed, but not saying so directly."

He further stated that there may be a question over whether the existing code covers chickens.

"A well-crafted ordinance would benefit the city by making sure backyard chickens are kept in safe and

sanitary conditions that do not disturb neighbors,” Stycos said. He noted that the current Cranston City Council would still not be able to gather the votes to override what he called a “likely” veto by Fung.

Patten agreed that an ordinance would ensure that chicken-keeping was protected for those who are raising the birds, but would also protect the chickens and ensure they are raised safely.

In Patten’s role at Cluck!, she interacts with those who have started their own backyard farming efforts, which takes the shape of food growing, beekeeping and animal-keeping, including chickens, and extending to rabbits, ducks and other animals. The interest in backyard farming and animal-keeping has risen in recent years, she said, with more people interested in sustainability and growing their own food.

Often, she said, as people’s skills grow, they become interested in expanding their setups. Someone may start with growing vegetables in their backyard, she said, but after learning and attaining more ability within that arena, they may want to expand to bee-keeping or raising ducks.

Cluck! helps to educate those who are interested in starting their own backyard setups, including animals and plants. This covers retail support, classes, books and a focus on the social mission of encouraging farming in urban and peri-urban spaces. The store has recently moved to Cranston after spending five years on the West Side of Providence.

Those who are interested in doing this may face a variety of challenges, depending on where they live. Rhode Island’s regulations vary by city, which can be frustrating for these who are starting to delve into some aspect of backyard farming.

“Rhode Island is pretty reasonable,” Patten said. Providence’s ordinance is pro-chicken, she said, but some communities face stricter regulations and are not friendly toward particular aspects of farming. Similarly, enforcement of these regulations may vary from town to town.

“To not allow people to raise food, I think, is problematic,” she said.

Most people she encounters who begin to raise chickens or other animals may be looking to raise some form of food. For chickens, that frequently means eggs, and some families may come to regard their animals as pets, she said.

Tina, Louise and Gayle, three ducks living in the backyard belonging to Corey, a Cumberland resident, have certainly come to be regarded in this way.

Corey, who is 29 and lives with his girlfriend, said they have come to know the ducks’ personalities. They are an addition to an already animal-friendly home; he and his girlfriend also take care of a dog, a cat and a lizard.

Corey and his girlfriend were originally interested in the ducks for their eggs. But now? “[The ducks] are a part of the family,” he said.

Corey and his girlfriend live in a neighborhood with close neighbors and apartment-style residences made out of old mill housing. The ducks live in an enclosure in the backyard, he said, where they have a house, a heat lamp and pools of water. They are not visible from the road. At times, the ducks are let out of the enclosure, always under supervision, and children in the neighborhood like to come visit the

ducks.

“Nobody’s cared, nobody’s complained,” Corey said of his neighbors.

Cumberland has regulations regarding the keeping of animals such as ducks. Among them are rules stipulating that the enclosures for these animals cannot be too close to a neighbor’s property and ducks may be kept only in single family homes. Though other regulations have been met, he said, these are the two that Corey is aware he is breaking.

However, Corey noted that his neighbors are alright with the setup currently arranged, and though he and his girlfriend live in an apartment, the building is his parents’ and a friend lives upstairs.

“It doesn’t bother anybody in my house ... it didn’t seem like a reason not to get ducks,” he said.

Similarly, Patten stated that many people in Cranston keep chickens. She said she often sees chickens become a gateway for backyard farmers who become interested in expanding to care for other animals like goats or quail.

“[They] get a little itch for something else,” she said.

She explained that in spite of some regulatory challenges in some areas, backyard farming has a robust support system that helps it thrive in RI. The state has many small farms that backyard farmers can visit and learn from that make them feel like they are part of a community. The small farms are, in turn, helped by the RI food culture, which has seen increasing interest in farm-to-table and locally sourced food.

“You can see it. You can visit it,” Patten said.

That type of friendly, accessible farming community is a big part of the success of small backyard farms in the state. **Additionally, there is interest in community gardens, for those who may not have access to a backyard to grow their own food. These often have waiting lists, she said.**

For the time being, a pro-chicken ordinance in Cranston appears unlikely. However, for many, this will remain an issue that is not just close to home, but in their own backyards.

Medical Marijuana in a Hospital Setting

A hospital stay for a Rhode Island resident meant she was not able to use her physician-directed medical marijuana, which she said resulted in negative physical effects, only cured when she began using it again without hospital staff’s knowledge.

RI legalized medical marijuana in 2006, and since then, roughly 19,000 people statewide have received certifications from their physicians to allow them to use the substance for a limited number of conditions, including chronic pain, severe nausea and seizures.

The Medical Marijuana Act protects cultivation of a limited amount of marijuana, as well as its use and possession, for those card-carrying users.

There also exist provisions protecting primary caregiver cardholders, who are subject to a different set of regulations, but are legally allowed to possess and help a patient to use medical marijuana. These provisions are restricted to those who have been registered through the Rhode Island Department of Health (RIDOH).

A 54-year-old RI resident (who asked to remain anonymous) recently suffered an infection that required hospitalization at Miriam Hospital in Providence. She is a medical marijuana user, which her doctor recommended based on her chronic pain. She received her medical card three years ago.

She explained that although her diagnosis was for “ongoing issues that are uncomfortable,” her use of it has helped with other issues, including social anxiety, sleeplessness, depression and the facilitation of other medicines she uses.

“I use it to treat social anxiety more than anything,” she explained.

Having a medical card, she said, has “transformed” her experience with marijuana, which she said she had used before on and off throughout her life. Because the medical card allows her to access drugs from experienced medical marijuana growers, the drug is safer, and a “reliable medicine.”

“It’s rare that you [could] find people who were breeding for specific medical conditions [before medical marijuana],” she explained.

However, when she was admitted to Miriam Hospital in 2017, she said it was clear that her medical marijuana would not be considered a “maintenance drug” by hospital staff. Maintenance drugs are medicines that a patient has been taking long-term or for a chronic condition.

As a result, she became sicker in the hospital, nauseous from the medicine being given to her for her infection and vomiting frequently. Her stress and anxiety were also heightened, she said.

Under the Medical Marijuana Act, medical marijuana cards grant access to the drug in the same way that other medicines might be accessed.

“For the purposes of medical care, including organ transplants, a patient cardholder’s authorized use of marijuana shall be considered the equivalent of the authorized use of any other medication used at the direction of a physician, and shall not constitute the use of an illicit substance,” the law reads.

However, according to RIDOH, individual medical organizations have the right to administer medicine at their own discretion.

Andrea Bagnall Degos, communications director at the Rhode Island Department of Health, said hospitals have jurisdiction over patient treatment. Medication decisions are made at the hospital, by the doctors, nurses, pharmacy and any other members of specific hospitals’ treatment teams.

“RIDOH can’t compel a hospital or professional to use any specific treatment,” Bagnall Degos said.

Eventually, the hospitalized woman felt compelled to use medical marijuana while in the hospital. She first tried edibles, brought from home by her family, but said she could not keep them down, and so

moved on to her vaporization pen, which she used in the bathroom. Because she was able to use the bathroom on her own, she said, she was able to use her pen in private, without hospital staff knowing.

“Within about three minutes, I felt incredibly better,” she said. The marijuana helped her to tolerate the medicine she was receiving, to be able to sleep, and to feel less stressed overall.

“It enabled me to tolerate being there ... I just think it helped my overall well-being,” she said.

She explained that she continued to use it during the rest of her hospital stay, always in private, where she said it was easy to use it. She was not sure what would have happened if doctors or nurses discovered what she was doing. “For me, the risk of doing it was worth it.

“I felt like I needed to do it, to get the heck out of there,” she said.

Grace Hyde, a compassion care center coordinator and Motif’s cannabis columnist, explained that engaging in this activity without her medical staff’s knowledge carried significant health risks.

“THC is a vasodilator (lowers blood pressure and raises heart rate) and it could interact with other medications, but also could lead your medical team to thinking other medications or your illness that you’re hospitalized for are creating the effects,” Hyde wrote in an email.

“It’s generally best to be on the same page with your physician so there’s no confusion. You definitely don’t want to sneak it in and then have them find out from a toxicology report,” she explained.

Hyde said she did not recommend using medical marijuana while in the hospital without a doctor’s knowledge, and that use on hospital grounds was prohibited in most places. She said she would recommend talking to medical staff to determine a best route of care.

LifeSpan PR director **David Levesque** wrote the following to us on behalf of Miriam Hospital: “In compliance with state and federal law regarding medical marijuana. Lifespan hospital facilities strictly prohibit smoking or vaporizing of any kind, including the use of medical marijuana. Alternative drug therapies are made available to the patient for the duration of inpatient admission. Should the patient and his or her prescribing provider decide not to interrupt the therapeutic use of marijuana, alternative delivery methods such as edibles may be secured by the patient. Clinical staff will document the prescription as made by the prescribing third-party provider and oversee its use by the patient. Hospital staff does not store, prescribe, administer or dispense medical marijuana.” (That last sentence is in accordance with the same federal and state laws that affect pharmacies).

Bagnall Degos said she is not aware of any hospitals that are administering medical marijuana in RI. She also stated that several regulations related to licensing analytical labs for sampling and testing medical marijuana are currently in public review until January 18.

She said use in hospitals is something she would like to see become more accepted and accessible. “I would like to see medical cannabis treated the same as any other [medicine],” she said, making clear that she does not advocate for recreational use, but limits her discussion to medical marijuana specifically.

“People need to realize this is something people need access to,” she said.

Conflict in East Greenwich Heats Up

Protesters arrived to an East Greenwich Town Council meeting last month. Their goal: Make their voices heard, without saying a word.

The town council of East Greenwich, made up of four Republican representatives and one Democrat, has recently become a contentious political sticking point for residents.

In response to what residents say has been months of the board withholding and lying, Engage East Greenwich (EEG), a new organizing group, is operating a fact-checking online effort. The group took shape after issues regarding the town's schools, budget and town manager flared during the last six months. EEG was a driving force behind a protest that took place at the November meeting, encouraging attendance and helping to organize the card demonstration.

In the card demonstration, meeting attendees reportedly held red and green cards, raising them to show approval or disapproval on issues the council discussed and the actions taken that night. According to attendees, it was about ensuring that there was a way for the town to make their opinions known to the council because an agenda released in advance of the meeting did not include the opportunity for public comment.

"We did want the town to have a voice," Shareen Knowlton of EEG said.

The East Greenwich town government website does not have any agendas or minutes posted online for the current year; 2016 minutes and agendas are available.

Agendas can be found for East Greenwich, as well as other RI cities and towns, at the Secretary of State's website. According to the agenda for the November 20, 2017, meeting, no public comment section was included on the agenda. The same was true of the November 14 meeting.

The November 6 meeting, however, did include public comment, as did most meetings that took place earlier in the year, excluding special meetings. Consistently, there is a time limit noted on the agendas, most often a 15-minute limit, occasionally 30 minutes.

Renu Englehart, a member of the East Greenwich Zoning Board and an administrator for EEG, explained that the public comment portion of the meetings often are added to the ends of meetings, which she feels does not allow residents to comment on issues before action is taken on them, and furthermore, may discourage participation, as residents may not be able to stay through the end of council meetings, which can run late into the evening.

"There's no way to get your voice out there," she said.

Both women asserted that the Town Council has been the main catalyst for the creation of EEG, which operates on Facebook to provide a Snopes-inspired fact-checking system.

Elizabeth McNamara, a journalist and blogger in East Greenwich, runs the website East Greenwich

News. She conducts hyperlocal reporting, which she said she began doing through my02818, a local news site, before it got bought by Patch.com. She then worked with Patch for about two and a half years until 2014, when she was laid off as part of a company-wide reduction in workforce. She then moved into doing her own reporting after Patch stopped doing that type of work.

"I thought, 'There's an opening there for a news website,'" McNamara said. She launched East Greenwich News not long after, which ran for about a year before going on hiatus, she said.

At the beginning of this year, she said she was already thinking about re-launching the website, and then the Town Council and the school board began to show signs of disagreement over the budget. "It just seemed like a good time to start reporting again," McNamara explained. She said that East Greenwich tended to be a sleepy town in the past. There were always things to report on, she said, but things tended to be quiet. Things have changed, though. "People really want to know what's going on," McNamara stated.

Last month, McNamara wrote a [two-part](#) explanatory piece on the political issues flaring in East Greenwich. According to the article, tensions began to build in town following the 2016 election, which saw an incumbent Republican town council member, Sue Cienki, made town council president, and two new board members elected. The other council members were also incumbents.

According to McNamara's first explainer article, tensions heightened in the early part of this year, particularly after a mailer claiming that the median tax rate for homeowners there had increased 51% in six years. A URI math professor reportedly did a breakdown of the number and concluded that the actual percentage was 15; he produced several videos explaining this, according to McNamara's piece.

That spring, the budget came to the forefront of the political issues gaining traction in East Greenwich. The town hired a third-party firm, Providence Analytics, to first investigate the school district's finances and then, under a contract extension, to do the same to the town's finances. After the findings stated that there were "unsustainable collective bargaining agreements" and "short-sighted employment practices" related to the fire department, rumors about an ouster of the town manager, Tom Coyle, began, McNamara reported. When the subsequent budget was approved, the town meeting did not include public comment.

"When they let him go," Englehart said, "people were upset by that."

A week later, two executive-session meetings resulted in Coyle's job performance being assessed, and, subsequently, Gayle Corrigan, the head of Providence Analytics, being approved as acting town manager.

This decision was later harshly condemned by a superior court judge, in a decision issued last month. The town council was scolded for violating the Open Meetings Act in several ways, including the decision being made in executive session, the vote on instituting an acting town manager being left off the agenda, and the fact that no minutes were taken during the executive session meeting.

Corrigan's appointment was a major point of contention and concern for many in town. After her appointment was nullified in the November decision, the town council convened again in November and, to much public disapproval, re-appointed Corrigan to her acting town manager position and reconfirmed the actions taken during her first five-month tenure, according to *The Providence Journal*. She is currently in the position while a search for a permanent manager is underway.

Knowlton explained that she was concerned not just about Corrigan, but also about the larger “way in which they’re [the town council] conducting business” and what it represents. Furthermore, the response to those expressing concern has been “really disappointing,” she said.

Englehart expressed similar sentiments. “We’re finding out that the town council is even as bad as she is,” Englehart said. “She’s bad and they’re worse.”

Knowlton originally got involved over her concern with the handling of a school board issue that took place during the summer. In general, she said, town council members have been unresponsive to residents who want to express concern or difficult to reach. Andy Deutsch, however, a Republican on the council, has been more willing to talk, she said, and has been in communication with her via email. He is one of the newly elected members and the youngest on the council.

“Until Elizabeth [McNamara] started her blog, we were kind of in the dark,” Englehart said. The exclusion of public comment on agendas led to the card protest last month.

“How can they deny it?” she said. “We’re a democratic town, and we’re supposed to have a civic process.”

The group that both women are a part of will continue its work to fact-check the council, both explained. As of print time, the search for a new town manager is ongoing. None of the town council members responded to requests for comment.

“They’re not telling the truth and the only way we can get the truth out there is basically to fact-check everything they say,” Englehart said. “So that’s what we do.”

[East Greenwich Focuses on Town Transparency](#)

A new organizing group in East Greenwich has taken matters of town transparency into their own hands.

Engaged East Greenwich (EEG), a social-media based movement, has begun a new system of fact-checking the East Greenwich town council. And things have gotten increasingly contentious during the past few months. A group of residents, feeling misled and lied to, launched a Facebook group in an effort to disseminate information and verify claims being made by town officials — to create a Snopes-esque resource.

Renu Englehart, an administrator for the Facebook group and a member of the East Greenwich Zoning Board, is the only elected town official to be working with EEG. She said she has seen the town become more divided than it has ever been; she said the town used to be politically moderate, but she now sees more “hardcore” views being acted on by town officials.

"It's become so vitriolic in this town," she said. "People are so polarized."

In response to various claims made by the town council, a group of residents came together and decided that the town needed an independent forum verifying statements about things such as budget concerns and staffing issues.

The page describes itself as follows: "Engaged EG is a nonpartisan group of citizens from diverse backgrounds, political affiliations and perspectives who share a love of and commitment to East Greenwich. We are working toward transparency in local government."

Posts on the page include town agendas and meeting reminders, and also include links to documents breaking down the town budget and local taxes.

According to Shareen Knowlton, a member of EEG and an East Greenwich resident for 15 years, the group came together through Facebook, as residents voiced concerns and a desire to "get to the truth."

At the group's first meeting, she said, members began to dissect complex town issues and agreed to only put out "simple, verifiable truth." They wanted, she said, to create "a more accessible way to get engaged."

Englehart explained that there are two Facebook groups for EEG; the first group is a public one, which disseminates information and is accessible to anyone on Facebook, and the second is a private group, in which administrators and members are able to discuss issues, figure out ways to verify claims and organize.

The group recently put out a survey, Knowlton said, which asked residents to rank issues in town, the issues on which they feel well-informed, and an open-ended question asking respondents to name issues they wanted the group to dissect. At press time, the survey had received about 50 responses, and the group was planning to begin assessing results at its next meeting. Knowlton noted that the sample size was still small and she would like to see an increased circulation of the survey.

Englehart stated that the group is looking to move to a webpage-based platform, to make it accessible to East Greenwich residents who do not have a Facebook account. For now, the group continues to update the members with information.

Motif will continue to cover the political contention happening in East Greenwich in the coming weeks.

Healthcare, One Year Post-Election

Perhaps the image of healthcare burned most freshly in the nation's collective mind is the repeated struggles to repeal the Affordable Care Act, colloquially referred to as Obamacare. Congressional Republicans have long had a repeal of this act in their sights, often referring to a plan they called "repeal and replace."

However, in the multiple attempts to repeal the law, which expanded healthcare access and coverage across the United States and made changes to existing policies, plans to replace the bill were scarce and not typically a part of the vote to repeal.

The nonexistence of a method to replace the ACA, combined with predictions from the internal scoring agency for Congressional bills that the proposed repeals would cause premiums and costs to skyrocket, and would result in millions of people uninsured, the July bill to repeal was ultimately defeated by a margin of just three senators: Linda Collins, Lisa Murkowski and John McCain, who unexpectedly arrived on the Senate floor after a cancer diagnosis and gave the bill his literal thumbs-down.

When Congressional Republicans attempted to repeal it again, in September, Collins and McCain, joined by Senator Rand Paul, were enough to halt the bill again and the vote on it was never brought to the floor.

Congress was trying to pass the bill under a process called “budget reconciliation.” The rules of budget reconciliation allow a filibuster to be broken with just 50 votes, rather than the 60 typically allowed under Senate rules, according to the *LA Times*. However, budget reconciliation included a September 30 deadline.

Because the latest attempt to repeal the ACA, with the Graham-Cassidy bill in September, failed, the initial impression was that repeal is effectively dead, and the ACA will stand.

However, as *Vox* reported in September, it is possible that under a new tax bill, Congressional Republicans could again pass another set of budget resolution rules and throw the future of the ACA into question once again. This would most likely be linked to a tax reform bill, which is expected to be released after November 1.

In the meantime, the administration has begun what appears to be an effort to disassemble pieces of the ACA. The Department of Health and Human Services recently rescinded a presidential mandate that required employers to cover birth control methods in their insurance policies offered to employees. This has opened up the possibility that more employers will pull back on insuring birth control methods, which could cause the out-of-pocket costs for contraceptives like the pill, IUDs and others to increase substantially, according to *The New York Times*.

This move was made as a part of a broad “religious protections” effort, which included guidance from the Justice Department that employers and organizations citing religious convictions may claim exemption from nondiscrimination cases in court, a move that could have deeply negative effects on the civil rights of those who are gay, lesbian or trans.

“More than 55 million women have access to birth control without co-payments because of the contraceptive coverage mandate, according to a study commissioned by the Obama administration. Under the new regulations, hundreds of thousands of women could lose those benefits,” *The New York Times* wrote in October.

In May, Congress also voted to allow states to de-fund Planned Parenthood, a move that will likely affect primarily states that are already restrictive. The move was passed after Vice President Mike Pence broke a tie in the Senate.

Advocates have stated that this type of move, should states choose to de-fund their support of Planned

Parenthood, access to women's health services, including mammograms, PAP smears and other healthcare services, will be affected. As mandated in the Hyde Amendment, federal money, through programs like Medicaid, are already disallowed from going toward abortions, which have been the major sticking point for many ideological and religious conservatives, except in several narrow cases, including pregnancy through rape or incest, and cases where continuing a pregnancy will endanger the life of the mother.

However, the past year has also seen the public move toward favoring more comprehensive healthcare coverage plans, including single-payer and universal healthcare initiatives, according to recent data.

A poll published by the Pew Research Center in June stated that 60% of Americans believe that it is the government's responsibility to ensure that all Americans are insured, a number that remained steady from January through the first half of the year.

Nearly 33% of those people believe that the government should offer a single-payer system for healthcare, a number that jumped five percentage points in six months earlier this year, and was up 12 points from 2014.

A similar poll conducted by *Politico* pointed to a growing percentage of the population beginning to support single-payer healthcare. This system of insurance would insure all Americans through a government-sponsored plan, rather than through a mix of public and private offerings, as exists now.