

# Rhode Island Spotlight: Keeping People WARM



It is the food, of course, that has drawn in tens of thousands of people over the past three decades. That and a bed, for those who had nowhere else to go. In 1987 Westerly Area Rest Meals — or WARM — began as a volunteer effort by a coalition of area churches. It has evolved into so much more, and this year will serve 2,300 people — primarily in Westerly, but also in surrounding communities in Rhode Island and nearby Connecticut.



WARM's executive director Russ Partridge has overseen a dramatic transformation of the organization since he arrived in 2008, including the construction of a brand new building three years ago, as well as some expansion and revitalization of existing programs. The new building includes a spacious and well-equipped kitchen, with storage areas adjacent to it.

"We had a vision of a facility where people could come and be treated with our values of compassion, hope and dignity, and with accountability in the time that they're here," Partridge said. It looked a lot different even a decade ago. The administrative offices were housed in a bakery building and the shelter in what used to be a bar back in the day. WARM started out as a soup kitchen and an emergency shelter.



This year the center will serve 35,000 meals — lunch and dinner seven days a week — and on any given night will house 80 people across the area in emergency, transitional and permanent housing. Like many social service agencies WARM is catering as much to

the working poor as it is to the homeless.

“And that’s one of the reasons we run the types of programs that we do,” Partridge said. “It’s really meant to help people to meet or supplement their budget. If I can come to the WARM Center with my partner or with my children and be able to get a meal, I can use my financial resources to pay my utilities or pay my rent.”

Partridge spent 10 years moving up the ladder at Crossroads in Providence, but eight years ago was ready for a change. He was willing to take on a case manager’s position at WARM that would mean a huge pay cut, but the board saw the possibility early on for a transition of leadership.



Rev. Jean Barry, who in 1990 became WARM’s first executive director, worked with, then handed over the reins to Russ in 2012, just as construction on the building that ultimately would bear her name was getting underway. Neighbors who once objected to having a shelter in their midst now look favorably at a state-of-the-art facility that stands out on Spruce Street.

Tarni Maggs grew up in the Ashaway section of neighboring Hopkinton, then later Westerly. When her children were grown she returned to an alcohol and drug habit she’d had before she became a mom. “I lost my apartment just up the road and I made a call and they said, We can come get you right now.’ And I was like: *Oh my God.*”

She doesn’t mince words: the WARM Center saved her life — literally. She now works as a treatment assistant at AdCare in North Kingstown and is constantly talking up the WARM Center. “Some people have nowhere to go, especially women; it’s really, really hard for a woman to get sober. And I’ll talk to these people sometimes and I’ll say ‘You need to call WARM. And you can tell them Tarni said to call.’”



Partridge says the community has been tremendously supportive — volunteers will make more than 4,000 bag lunches for kids in area summer camps over the course of the season. “In coming here I was — and continue to be — blown away by the generosity that exists in the community, not only financially but also in the volunteers and the support that the organization gets,” he said. “We see a lot of sadness. We see people who have experienced a lot of trauma. But on the other side we get to see some of our successes — the fact we came to this beautiful

property and built a facility that really represents our feeling toward our clientele.”

Partridge adds that it’s been a great partnership with the community and public officials in Westerly and the surrounding towns.



“The nice thing we’ve been able to do is educate folks about poverty and about homelessness and I think they recognize that if WARM and other social service agencies in this area were not here they would have a serious problem with poverty.”

*If you want to see the video version of this story go to [www.RhodeIslandSpotlight.org](http://www.RhodeIslandSpotlight.org). If you know of a person or organization who you think deserves the Spotlight, send an email to [jim@RhodeIslandSpotlight.org](mailto:jim@RhodeIslandSpotlight.org).*