

# Papitto Opportunity Connection

September 2024

## Back To School

We are proud of our Papitto Opportunity Connection (POC) partners who are making a difference as students head back to school. Thank you to the [ELISHA project](#) for your generosity. With 87% of Roger Williams Middle School's enrollment of 800+ students coming from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, school administrators were looking to make students return to school as smooth and joyful as possible.

The ELISHA project delivered. Less than 24 hours after hearing about the school's need for supplies, the Elisha project donated 200 backpacks overstuffed with school supplies to Roger Williams Middle School.



With support from the ELISHA Project, students from Roger Williams Middle School headed back to school with new backpacks and school supplies.

Across the state, the first day of school was a party at the [Montessori Community School of Rhode Island](#) (MCS RI) —as families were welcomed with bubbles, balloons, and music. In partnership with [RIDE](#) (the Rhode Island Department of Education) the new state funded pre-k and kindergarten classroom makes MCS RI the first public Montessori School in Rhode Island history.

This positive change allows them to offer education for all with one classroom being tuition free. It also made way for new services like breakfast and lunch that are available to all students. MCS RI has expanded from 38 to 52 students with almost half being a [Comprehensive Community Action Program](#) (CCAP) recipients. Three teachers started out as interns from Rhode Island College's Youth Development Program as a part of MCS RI's belief in creating community partnership with local institutions.

To learn more about what is happening at MCS RI, visit [mcsri.org](http://mcsri.org).

## POC Proudly Celebrates Hispanic Heritage Month

This September 15th to October 15th, Papitto Opportunity Connection (POC) highlights [National Hispanic Heritage Month](#) and recognizes the diverse traditions, histories, and achievements of the Hispanic and Latino community. In Rhode Island, people who identify as Hispanic or Latino make up nearly 18% of the state's population. This demographic shift is not only changing our state's economic landscape but also shaping its future.

Recently, the Rhode Island Hispanic Chamber of Commerce announced it has registered more than 1,000 members, well on their way to becoming of the largest business associations in the state.



Pictured above: Central Falls Mayor, Maria Rivera; Margaret Brassard, Brassard Events; Lt. Governor, Sabina Matos; and Ting Barnard, Ting Barnard Studio.

To mark the occasion, we caught up with POC grantees that are connecting with the community. On the first day of Hispanic Heritage Month, Margaret Brassard, owner of Brassard Events, hosted a “Latinas on Top” business luncheon, bringing together over 45 Latina-owned businesses in Rhode Island.



Joined by POC Board of Advisors member Ting Barnard, the women had an opportunity to share their companies' visions and network with other organizations. As a prominent leader and liaison for the Latino community, Margaret proudly uses her voice, her platform and her own event planning company to showcase local business owners and non-profit organizations.

### **Festival Latino**

Put your party shoes on and get ready for a day filled with fun and celebration as [Conexión Latina Newport](#) (CLN) hosts its annual Festival Latino, Saturday, Sept. 21, 12-6 p.m. at the Great Friends Meeting House, 21 Farewell St., Newport.

The organization works tirelessly to create opportunities for the Latino community on Aquidneck Island to create a sense of belonging, civic involvement, and leadership.

CLN's biggest event of the year, Festival Latino is a vibrant celebration of culture and it highlights the community, hard work, sacrifice and dedication of the Latino Community in the Newport area. The free event will feature live music, DJs, folk dancers, local vendors, food, dancing and learning spaces for kids and adults of all ages.

For more information, visit: [Festival Latino 2024](#)



### **Progreso Latino**

In Central Falls, [Progreso Latino](#) is celebrating 47 years of service with a special [Masquerade Gala on October 11 at Rhodes on the Pawtuxet](#). Executive Director Mario Bueno tells us this year's goals are to increase support for families facing financial crisis,

expand the organization's volunteer base, and explore opportunities to open a new office in another urban community in the Blackstone Valley.

**POC:** Could you share any reflections on the non-profit's growth in the last year and its significance to the Latino community in Rhode Island?

**Bueno:** Progreso Latino has continued to grow, providing crucial support to our community members as they navigate life's challenges and pursue their professional goals. Our location is a cultural hub where people find a sense of belonging, share learning experiences, find transformational programs that support their personal growth, and find the strength to push for systemic change.



Our growth is a testament to the collective effort of committed volunteers and activists. We understand that no one organization can effect lasting change alone, so we work closely with our dynamic network of stakeholders. This collaboration has allowed us to strengthen key programs—bilingual early education, youth services, older adult programs, and workforce development—while innovating with limited resources to address larger community issues.

In the past year, over 600 adults participated in our bilingual adult education programs, with more than 40% advancing in their studies. Twenty-five students earned their high school equivalency credentials, while many others completed career training. Other highlights include our tax assistance program which provided guidance to 1,000 individuals and our immigration and social services, which supported hundreds of families. Our food distribution and emergency financial assistance programs aided thousands of families, while over 200 older adults participated in cultural activities. Additionally, our youth mentorship program served 90 young people, helping them build skills and confidence through creative projects and community service. Our advocacy efforts, in collaboration with partners, resulted in meaningful policy changes in housing and benefit programs.



Central Falls, State Rep. Joshua Giraldo recently hosted Progreso Latino's constituents at the RI Statehouse. This was an opportunity for our youth and adults to learn about government and the importance of civic engagement.

## Fuerza Laboral

Also in Central Falls, Fuerza Laboral continues to dedicate its efforts to ending the exploitation of workers. They do this through education, training, community organizing, leadership development, and the development of worker-owned cooperative enterprises.

Fuerza's team, led by executive director Heiny Maldonado, will welcome the community to celebrate its 18th anniversary this October 25th at 6PM with a Halloween-themed, costumed "Mystical Ball" fundraiser at their Central Falls headquarters on 6 Chace's Lane.



**POC: What are you focusing on this Hispanic Heritage Month? How are you involving the community?**

**Maldonado:** Happy Hispanic Heritage Month! There is so much to celebrate. Since incorporating our first co-op in 2018, we have incubated, developed, strengthened, supported or transitioned 15 worker cooperatives. These co-ops are linked together in a network we call the Solidarity Economy.

After many years of renting offices, in 2023 we were able to purchase our own building at 6 Chace's Lane in Central Falls, which is big enough to be the headquarters for our growing programs and to incubate worker co-ops onsite.

The family is the bedrock of the Latino community, and one of the ways we want to honor that is by delving deeply into childcare cooperatives in Rhode Island. RI is the 13th most expensive state for childcare, and average childcare costs frequently exceed rent. We have been in communication with creative childcare initiatives in New Haven, CT; Springfield, MA; and Chicago, IL, —all with different organizational models. We will visit them and collect information to decide what could be possible here. We have already convened members of our community who provide home-based care or are interested in having a childcare business, and there will be many more opportunities for involvement to come.



Next year, we will continue to offer Labor Rights Consultations, Workers Rights Courses, Computer Literacy Classes, Introductory Classes to Cooperatives, and provide one-on-one support to new and existing worker-owned cooperatives. If you would like to start a co-op, or transition a traditional business into a co-op, please get in touch with us at 401-725-2700 or [info@fuerza-laboral.org](mailto:info@fuerza-laboral.org).

We will hold several industry-specific convenings for both childcare and construction workers interested in forming co-ops.

## Update: POC June Grant Applications

As a result of the June POC grant cycle, we received more than 125 applications for both the POC \$1million Innovation Challenge Grant and small grant program.

The process of reviewing each proposal to ensure that they support POC's mission to provide opportunities in education, job skills training, and entrepreneurship for Rhode Island's communities most in need is lengthy. The Board is wrapping up its work, and we expect to make grant announcements by the end of September or early October.

The next grant cycle will be open December 1-15, 2024.

For more information, click [here](#).

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