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CORONAVIRUS CRISIS

Businesses failing to get pandemic-related payouts

BY MARY MACDONALD | MacDonald@PBN.com

KEVIN MILLONZI HAS "VIRAL" coverage as part of his business-interruption insurance, but that didn't save the West Warwick caterer from getting rejected when he filed a claim because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

FOCUS: INSURANCE

His insurance company, The Hartford Financial Services Group Inc., told him his policy didn't cover losses related to the coronavirus crisis, he said. Millonzi, the owner of **Millonzi Fine Catering** in West Warwick, is now preparing to file a lawsuit.

He wonders why he paid into a policy for years only to be turned down when he needed the help. Like many business owners, he had to lay off most of his employees in the pandemic and has limped through the past year.

SEE PAYOUTS PAGE 24

A NEW DIRECTION?

ON THE MOVE: Gov. Daniel J. McKee, center, tours the Thames Street commercial district in Newport on April 6, meeting with business owners along the way. He was joined by Sabina Matos, left, now lieutenant governor, and Erin Donovan-Boyle, executive director of the Greater Newport Chamber of Commerce.
COURTESY R.I. GOVERNOR'S OFFICE

McKee wants R.I. Commerce to better serve small business

BY CASSIUS SHUMAN | Shuman@PBN.com

AMID THE UPHEAVAL OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC LAST June, Daniel J. McKee appeared frustrated.

McKee, then Rhode Island's lieutenant governor, took the unusual step of openly criticizing the decision-making of then-Gov. Gina M. Raimondo, a fellow Democrat.

He believed he had been ignored by the administration from the start of the coronavirus crisis and publicly made it clear he felt Raimondo should offer more help to small businesses, funneling more federal COVID-19 relief funds to struggling employers that were closing their doors. McKee proposed creating grant and loan programs to keep small businesses afloat through the economic slowdown.

SEE DIRECTION PAGE 12

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TRENDING

Most-read stories on PBN.com, March 2021

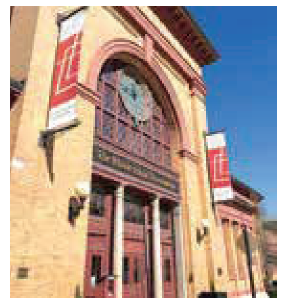
MEDRECYCLER

1 Do promised benefits from a proposed medical-waste treatment plant in West Warwick outweigh potential negatives?
PUBLISHED ONLINE: MARCH 19
MedRecycler-RI wants to build a medical-waste treatment plant in West Warwick. Up to 70 tons of medical human and animal waste would be shipped in, shredded, dried and treated at high heat to break it down into gas that can be burned for electricity.
tinyurl.com/4kd5vjuy

2 Retail center in Warwick sells for $5.8M
POSTED ONLINE: MARCH 18
A fully occupied retail center at 1191 Division St., Warwick, was sold Feb. 18 for $5.8 million to Newman Properties, based in Brookline, Mass., through its affiliate, Atlantic Capital Retail LLC.
pbn.com/retail-center-in-warwick-sells-for-5-8m

COURTESY NEWMAN PROPERTIES

3 Marsella Development Corp. to purchase Union Station's lower floor, build food hall
POSTED ONLINE: MARCH 15
Marsella Development Corp. announced that it is currently negotiating with Rhode Island Foundation on acquiring the lower floor of 1 Union Station in Providence.
pbn.com/marsella-development-corp-to-purchase-union-stations-lower-floor-build-food-hall

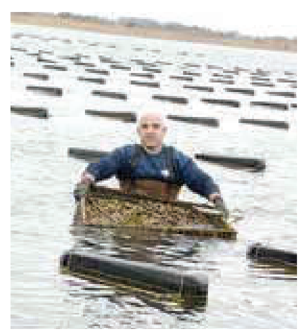


COURTESY RHODE ISLAND FOUNDATION

PBN FILE PHOTO/MARK S. MURPHY

4 National Grid enters agreement to sell R.I. operations to Pa.-based company
POSTED ONLINE: MARCH 18
National Grid PLC entered into an agreement to sell its Rhode Island power business, known as Narragansett Electric Co., to the Pennsylvania-based PPL Corp. for $3.8 billion.
pbn.com/national-grid-enters-agreement-to-sell-r-i-operations-to-pa-based-company

5 CRMC subcommittee recommends denial of proposed South Kingstown oyster farm expansion
POSTED ONLINE: MARCH 8
A subcommittee of the R.I. Coastal Resources Management Council voted unanimously to recommend denying the application for a 3-acre oyster and scallop farm in Potter Pond in South Kingstown.
pbn.com/crmc-subcommittee-recommends-denial-of-proposed-south-kingstown-oyster-farm-expansion



PBN FILE PHOTO/MIKE SKORSKI

6 R.I. to loosen limits on restaurants, events and gyms
POSTED ONLINE: MARCH 4
pbn.com/r-i-covid-19-cases-rise-by-375-with-5-more-deaths

7 Can name change give T.F. Green a lift?
PUBLISHED ONLINE: MARCH 26
pbn.com/r-i-officials-hope-name-change-will-give-airport-a-lift

8 Providence lays out conceptual plans for $140M Kennedy Plaza redesign
POSTED ONLINE: MARCH 10
pbn.com/providence-lays-out-conceptual-plans-for-140m-kennedy-plaza-redesign

9 Providence expands COVID-19 vaccination to age 50 and older in 3 hard-hit neighborhoods
POSTED ONLINE: MARCH 2
pbn.com/providence-expands-covid-19-vaccination-to-age-50-and-older-in-three-hard-hit-neighborhoods

10 R.I. opens COVID-19 vaccine eligibility to people aged 60-64, and to those 16-64 with specific health conditions
POSTED ONLINE: MARCH 11
pbn.com/r-i-opens-covid-19-vaccine-eligibility-to-people-aged-60-64-and-to-people-16-64-with-specific-health-conditions

5Q: Gillian Friedman Fox

Executive director, Newport Music Festival

PBN PHOTO/KATE WHITNEY LUCEY

BY ALEXA GAGOSZ | Contributing Writer

1 Briefly explain your responsibilities within your role at the Newport Music Festival.
I am responsible for the artistic vision and direction of the festival, as well as the day-to-day operations, which includes development, community relations, marketing and brand strategy.

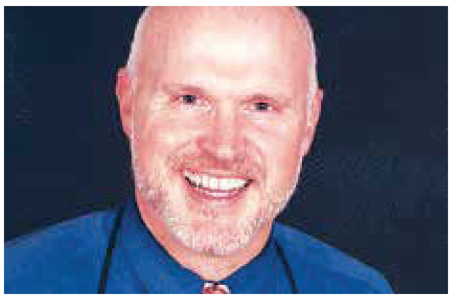
2 What are some of your big-picture goals?
I look forward to expanding the festival's national profile and brand awareness by introducing fresh, exciting and artistically excellent programming each summer. I will launch a new commissioning initiative that celebrates living composers and contemporary chamber music and amplifies the many diverse talented voices creating classical music today.

3 What are some of your ideas to attract a broader audience?
The SOLUNA Festival attracted younger and more diverse concert goers to the Dallas Symphony due, in part, to the use of nontraditional venues such as art galleries, warehouses and parks. By staging performances outside of the concert hall, patrons left previously held expectations at the door and experienced the music in new and exciting ways. I hope that by incorporating a few unexpected venues in addition to the beloved mansions, new audiences will feel encouraged to attend. I will also reimagine our branding to reach a wider audience, both demographically and geographically.

4 What lessons did you learn at the Dallas Symphony Orchestra that you will bring to Rhode Island?
The DSO is at the center of cultural life in Dallas, serving an integral role in the community at every level. This model will be a blueprint for my time in Newport. By increasing our commitment to the Newport school system and other collaborative community-based projects, we will open ourselves to new audiences.

5 What could the recovery plan for the summer look like?
We are committed to welcoming audiences back for live performances this summer in a safe and engaging way. Newport is home to some of the most iconic historic properties in the world, which have hosted the festival's performances for decades. These Guilded Age mansions have stunning grounds that offer the perfect backdrop for outdoor, socially distanced concerts. Newport is also home to beautiful parks, vineyards and beaches, and we look forward to presenting concerts there as well. ■

I will … reimagine our branding to reach a wider audience, both demographically and geographically.



DINING OUT | BRUCE NEWBURY

Truly, a season of renewal

SPRINGTIME IS ALWAYS a season of rebirth and renewal. That phenomenon is in evidence on restaurant row. Eateries are reporting a return of faithful followers as more vaccinations take place. Over the recent Easter weekend, hundreds of places in Rhode Island were full to the capacity allowed. Reports on social media, word of mouth and reports in conventional media told a similar story – the state's restaurants are returning to full flower.

Sam Glynn, the proprietor of the popular **Chomp Kitchen & Drink** burger restaurants in Warren and Providence told East Bay Newspapers that 2020 was the busiest year ever for Chomp. A lot of its growth had to do with delivery and takeout options. Glynn said there are no plans to do away with delivery. Chomp's location on Ives Street on the East Side of Providence opened in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic. The new Chomp will feature a takeout window to facilitate customers in search of a burger and a beer to go. (The General Assembly is debating extending "cocktails to-go," including beer and wine. Glynn and other industry advocates such as Rick Simone of the **Federal Hill Commerce Association** are lobbying for its continuation and to make it permanent.)

Longtime Providence restaurateur Phyllis Arffa announced on social media at the end of March that her beloved restaurant Blaze is reopening in a new location. Clues of that location may be found in Blaze's new name: Blaze At The Brooklyn. The address has been revealed as 209 Douglas Ave., Providence, as part of the **Brooklyn Coffee, Tea and Guest House**. Arffa is hiring line cooks and other personnel for her soon-to-reopen venture.

As spring dining emerges, restaurateurs are hosting guests both in their increased-capacity dining rooms and outdoor spaces. Managers are noticing that their places have resumed their atmosphere of hustle and bustle. On Easter, the crowds consist of families, led by newly vaccinated grandparents. Many shared how they are more comfortable coming out now, a substantial number for the first time since last year.

Like spring seedlings, the newly reemerging restaurant scene needs vital components to grow and flourish. Guests are essential to the ability of the food service industry to sustain itself. Assistance programs, loans, grants and other short-term "protections" from the government are not a substitute for a vibrant, active, supportive customer base that is the key to any business's long-term success. The key will be a full reservations list booked weeks and even months in advance. When the public is comfortable with making plans for life events such as graduations, anniversaries and the like, it will be readily seen that the economy has returned.

BRIGHT OUTLOOK: Chomp Kitchen & Drinks reports that 2020 was very busy for both its location in Providence, pictured above, and in Warren. As the weather warms, business is expected to improve in the local restaurant industry.
COURTESY CHOMP KITCHEN & DRINKS

OpenTable has been tabulating what it calls The State of the Industry since March of 2020. The site lists how many people have dined at restaurants in 2021. The comparison with 2019's figures is of particular interest. The unit of measure is the number of seated diners at a sample of restaurants on the OpenTable network on specific days of the week compared with the same day of the week in 2019. In Rhode Island, the week before Easter, from March 29 to April 3, 2021, that number was up 5% per capita. The same week, Florida restaurants were up an average of 7% per capita. But restaurants in New York are still down. It may be observed that looking at a statistical comparison of lukewarm business from a time we remember as booming is instructive. ■

The **newly reemerging restaurant scene** needs vital components to grow.

Bruce Newbury's radio show and podcast, "Dining Out with Bruce Newbury," is broadcast on WADK 1540 AM and several radio stations throughout New England. Email him at Bruce@BruceNewbury.com.

SOMETHING NEW

KEEPING TRACK: Justin M. Kim, left, and Michael W. Lai designed an app to help health care workers track their emotional and mental wellness.
COURTESY CRESS HEALTH

App targets wellness of caregivers

BY ALEXA GAGOSZ | Contributing Writer

JUSTIN M. KIM and Michael W. Lai were in the process of developing an app that allowed users to log their most intimate mental health concerns and join support groups.

Enter: COVID-19.

Pictures and videos of overwhelmed health care workers on the front lines flooded social media. Kim, a Brown University senior, and Lai, a Hofstra University student, pivoted **Cress Health** to provide support for their new target audience of the nurses, doctors and other medical staff treating COVID-19 patients.

The duo earned several grants for their development journey, including financial assistance from Brown's Nelson Center for Entrepreneurship and the Clinton Foundation's Student Action Fund.

In total, they received approximately $45,000 in grants for Cress Health.

The app helps users by connecting them to group chats with peers and personal journaling to track mental wellness. Users will also receive reports that summarize trends in their emotional and mental health.

"These health care workers are the superheroes of this pandemic," said Lai. "We feel a duty to do whatever we can to support them in return."

Cress is also working closely with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees to help provide the app and additional wellness resources to more refugees in Kenya. ■

SPOTLIGHT

FEELING COMFORTABLE: The waiting area of Dr. Amy Falk's The Eye Doctor in East Greenwich is decorated with plants and features comfortable chairs as part of the small-town, relaxed feel she brings to her eye care practice.
PBN PHOTO/ELIZABETH GRAHAM

'Small-town' eye care

Exams for children and adults

BY CASSIUS SHUMAN | Shuman@PBN.com

CURIOSITY LED DR. AMY FALK to visit an eye doctor's office while attending high school, sparking her interest in pursuing a career in health care.

Falk visited the doctor's office of a classmate's father with a friend and felt right at home in what she described as "a little dark room. I [thought], 'This is for me.' I liked the idea of helping people."

Falk grew up in Oneida, a town located near Syracuse in upstate New York, which she describes as "very small and friendly."

After graduating high school, she studied pre-med and physics at the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, Mass. She completed her training at the New England College of Optometry in 2004 and served her residency in advanced ocular disease at the Veterans Administration Medical Center in Brockton, Mass.

Along the way, she gained a better understanding of anatomy and the physics of the human eye. "I was fascinated by what we got to study," she said, noting that she came away wanting to "make people see better."

She accomplished that working at a private practice for nine years in Coventry, which she balanced with raising a family. With no room to grow, she decided to return to academia, landing a teaching position at the Massachusetts College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences University School of Optometry in Worcester.

In 2019, Falk turned down an invitation to become dean at the school after serving as associate dean of academics. During her tenure, she was responsible for opening three community vision centers in underserved areas of Massachusetts.

With hands-on experience, she was prepared when it came time for her to open her own practice. Falk said she was not ready to become an administrator and wanted to treat patients and realize the dream of owning her own practice.

Falk, who opened **The Eye Doctor** in East Greenwich in May of 2019, is a board-certified optometrist who specializes in ocular disease. A self-proclaimed "eye nerd," Falk handles most aspects of her business, including answering the phone whenever possible.

Her practice is different from the sterile feeling of a doctor's office. In fact, the only similarity is the equipment in her exam room and the administrative area in the center of the floor.

The waiting area is decorated with plants, comfortable chairs and a coffee bar, which has been closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Featured on specially designed shelves are an assortment of brand-name eyeglasses frames and sunglasses.

Falk's practice has a staff of four employees. Optician Roland Dauplaise, who she met while working in private practice, manages the frames and lenses side of the business. He has worked in the industry his entire career.

Falk persuaded Dauplaise to forgo retirement and join her practice by taking him to dinner to sweeten the pot. He agreed to come aboard on a part-time basis. "They don't make them like Roland," Falk said. "He's an eye geek like me."

As for what services her practice provides, Falk said she offers exams for children and adults, with a focus on ocular disease. Her intention is to remain true to her "small-town" approach.

"People in a small town should have access to expert-level care," she said. "I want to bring people that level of care. I don't want them to feel like a number." ■

OWNER: Dr. Amy Falk
TYPE OF BUSINESS: Optometrist
LOCATION: 16 Main St., East Greenwich
EMPLOYEES: Four
YEAR FOUNDED: 2019
ANNUAL REVENUE: WND

HOT TOPIC

Insurers pay COVID-19 costs for now

BY MARY MACDONALD | MacDonald@PBN.com

RHODE ISLAND IS REQUIRING health insurers operating in the state to cover out-of-pocket expenses for customers in need of COVID-19 treatment, raising the question of who will ultimately pay the price.

Under the state directive, the burden paying for people infected with COVID-19 is on health insurance companies for now, and they're expected to make do by using revenue from their premiums and reserves. They've been told to waive cost-sharing expenses traditionally borne by their customers.

These costs can be relatively small copays of $50 or $100 for a doctor or specialist visit, as well as co-insurance and deductibles, which can run into the thousands of dollars for people on high-deductible plans or who have family plans.

Individual companies that operate in Rhode Island were not able to immediately provide estimates this week of how much they have spent waiving the costs traditionally paid by their clients.

On April 2, the **R.I. Office of the Health Insurance Commissioner** issued a bulletin requiring the insurers operating in the state to cover patient out-of-pocket expenses for COVID-19 treatment until the state of emergency ends.

Three of the four major carriers – **Blue Cross & Blue Shield of Rhode Island**, **Tufts Health Plan**, and **Neighborhood Health Plan of Rhode Island** – have announced they will do so.

Since February, **United Healthcare of New England Inc.** had told clients that they are responsible for paying for their plan cost-share amounts, according to a website link provided by a company spokesman. But the spokesman confirmed on April 14 that the insurer is now complying with the state's directive.

The costs of treatment can be significant. Blue Cross, Rhode Island's largest health insurer, said the average cost of hospitalization for COVID-19 is $25,000 per patient.

In 2020, the disease accounted for 7% of the insurer's medical expenses, according to Dr. Matt Collins, Blue Cross chief medical officer and executive vice president. Overall, the insurer had medical expenses of about $1.8 billion in 2020, he said.

"I've never seen a single disease that actually shows up on the radar as representing a percent of our overall medical spending," he said.

> 'The **insurers are at risk** for these expenses.'
>
> **PATRICK M. TIGUE, R.I. health insurance commissioner**

The expense of treating COVID-19 decreased as 2020 progressed, as clinicians became more comfortable with monitoring people without admitting them to a hospital.

Will the costs, including for cost sharing, be passed on to customers in the coming years in the form of increased rates?

That's not how it works, Collins said. "You don't try to make up what you lost this year on next year," he said.

Patrick M. Tigue, the state's health insurance commissioner, agreed. He said any company that tries to seek increased rates next year to cover the cost of patient cost-sharing that it absorbed in prior years will be denied.

Premiums have been set and insurers cannot unilaterally modify them to pass on the burden of unanticipated costs, he said in an emailed statement.

"Like any other cost incurred due to the medical needs of covered members, the insurers are at risk for these expenses and they fund them from premium revenue and recourse to reserves, if necessary," he said. ■

R.I. plays role in making new COVID-19 vaccines

BY MARY MACDONALD | MacDonald@PBN.com

WHAT seemed like an epic race for an effective COVID-19 vaccine has produced several options that have people rolling up their sleeves across Rhode Island and the world.

But a number of new vaccines remain in development, including two that have a research base in the Ocean State.

As people scramble for appointments to take vaccines that have been approved, more alternatives are likely on the way. Potentially, they could either serve as supplementary vaccines in the U.S. later this year or be deployed internationally.

Some vaccines are at predevelopment stages, such as one proposed by Providence-based immunology company **EpiVax Inc.**, which did not receive federal funding through the massive Operation Warp Speed, the program that threw billions of dollars into the vaccine race last year. The company is continuing to raise funds for a clinical trial, according to Dr. Anne S. De Groot, EpiVax founder and CEO. She estimated a trial would cost $2.2 million.

She sees the EpiVax vaccine, which is aimed at enabling the body's T-cells to mount an attack against the COVID-19 virus, as a potential booster to another vaccine, or potentially as a "prime" for one. The need for vaccine development won't fade soon in the fight against COVID-19, she said.

"We have learned a lot about pathogens like coronavirus in recent years," De Groot said, citing HIV and the influenza viruses. "They tend to mutate over time. And vaccines have been difficult to make effective. HIV, in fact, we still don't have one. Flu, as everyone knows, we have to get a shot every year. It would not be surprising at all to see the same kind of evolution with coronavirus. We will have to make more vaccines as the virus mutates."

As viruses naturally mutate, the variations can make them more difficult to contain. Dr. Alan Rothman, a viral immunologist at the **University of Rhode Island**, teaches courses on virology and has found students more interested in the subject as they live through a pandemic.

"Viruses are the perfect Darwinian things in the universe because they reproduce really quickly and they find a niche and they exploit it," Rothman said.

IN GOOD HANDS: Jennifer Beaugh, right, pharmacy supervisor at The Miriam Hospital, hands a dose of COVID-19 vaccine to Dr. Karen Tashima at a clinic at The Miriam. Tashima is overseeing a clinical trial of the COVID-19 vaccine that hasn't yet received U.S. government approval.
COURTESY LIFESPAN CORP.

'We will **have to make more vaccines** as the virus mutates.'

DR. ANNE S. DE GROOT, EpiVax Inc. founder and CEO

"They mutate in any way they can to take advantage of it."

Trying to stay on top of those mutations is a task for developers of vaccines. One of the most promising ones on the horizon is made by Maryland-based Novavax Inc., which is in its third phase of clinical trials, a large-population trial to determine its effectiveness.

Rhode Island is one of 120 locations in which the trial is taking place in the U.S. and Mexico, and the vaccine's effectiveness in fending off COVID-19 will be reported to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.

Novavax has produced a vaccine that would require two injections. **The Miriam Hospital** is one of the local trial sites. Each day, about 130 participants – a mix of genders, ethnic backgrounds and ages – check in using smartphone apps to register symptoms or any health issues, according to Dr. Karen Tashima, an infectious-diseases specialist and director of clinical trials at the Immunology Center for **Lifespan Corp.**

A Warwick lab run by Velocity Clinical Research, of Durham, N.C., is also participating in the Novavax study.

About half of the local trial subjects were given the Novavax vaccine; half were given a placebo injection.

Phase-three trials in the United Kingdom and South Africa determined the Novavax COVID-19 vaccine was 96% effective, setting the stage for high expectations for the trial in North America. The trial results overseas showed the vaccine is 86% effective against the so-called U.K. variant of the infection, which is spreading rapidly in the U.S.

A more contagious version of the new coronavirus, the U.K. variant accounts for about 40% of the infections in Rhode Island and is expected to soon be responsible for the majority of infections, according to public health officials.

The phase-three trial is an exciting professional moment for many local researchers, Tashima said.

As soon as the FDA receives the completed trial data, the participants will be injected with the vaccine if they received the placebo, or a benign placebo if they received the vaccine. The study will continue for two years, with all health data on the vaccine being reported back to the FDA.

"We're looking for any side effects, anything that is happening to any participant during the time they are in the study, whether it's a stubbed toe or a sore arm," Tashima said.

As the rollout of approved vaccines has accelerated in Rhode Island, Tashima said she has received requests from some trial participants to get vaccinated. They've asked her, essentially to "unblind" the process and let them know if they received the vaccine or the placebo. In some cases, she said, she did release subjects from the study so they could get a vaccination.

Nevertheless, the study has been exciting to Tashima. "It's almost like real time that we're getting to see the results of our efforts, so it's pretty amazing," she said. ■

Franchisee: **Cristian Dersidan**

Home Instead Inc. | Warwick and North Kingstown

The pitch: Home Instead Inc. specializes in direct, one-on-one in-home care for senior residents. Caregivers from Home Instead regularly provide companionship and personal care. The organization has modified services in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Years in business: Four

Employees: 200

Cost to obtain franchise: $55,000 initial franchise fee; $115,000-$125,000 total startup cost

Before opening franchise: Dersidan worked for close to 10 years as an executive in the food service industry.

Reason for opening: Dersidan felt more like he wanted to make a difference in people's lives with Home Instead in lieu of working in the food industry.

GIVING BACK: Cristian Dersidan left a nearly 10-year career in the food service industry to operate a couple of Home Instead Inc. franchises, which provide one-on-one in-home care for senior residents, because he wanted to give something back and help people in the community.
PBN PHOTO/RUPERT WHITELEY

"The food industry didn't inspire me. It didn't seem meaningful enough. It didn't seem where I was feeling like I was giving back and making a difference in someone's life. When you give someone a meal [at a restaurant], it's a forgettable experience. You feel good for about an hour and move on to the next thing."

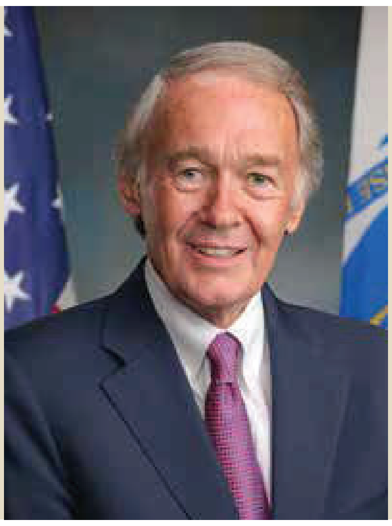
Franchise owners interested in being included in an upcoming Franchisee feature can contact James Bessette at (401) 680-4838 or Besette@PBN.com.

"We are continuing to keep everyone safe. We're doing daily screening of our staff before every shift. We provide [personal protective equipment] in the home on a regular basis to make sure people have these available. We continually educate [employees] to keep their distance when they're not providing personal care, and with good hygiene. We also gave staff the opportunity to get tested and vaccinated."

"Providing care for a senior in their homes changes their life, and their family's life, for the better. I feel privileged to do that, along with our staff, because it really feels good … to give back and to help people in our community."

ANSWERING QUESTIONS: Sen. Edward Markey, D-Mass., will be the keynote speaker at One SouthCoast Chamber of Commerce's April 21 virtual town hall.

COURTESY ONE SOUTHCOAST CHAMBER OF COMMERCE



EDITOR'S CHOICE

Markey will be keynote speaker at virtual town hall

ONE SOUTHCOAST CHAMBER of Commerce will hold a virtual town hall discussion featuring Sen. Edward Markey, D-Mass., as its keynote speaker. Attendees will have the opportunity to ask Markey questions during the discussion.

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 21, 1-2 P.M. Free

Online.

INFO AND REGISTRATION: members.onesouthcoast.com/events/details/one-southcoast-chamber-virtual-town-hall-with-senator-markey-498220

Business accounting

SCORE RHODE ISLAND will hold a workshop titled "Accounting for the Small Business" as part of its Show Me the Money series. Attendees will learn about what is needed to financially run a business.

SATURDAY, APRIL 17, 9:30 A.M. TO NOON. Free

Online.

INFO AND REGISTRATION: tinyurl.com/ProvLibSeriesSpring2021

Getting started

THE CENTER FOR WOMEN & Enterprise will hold a workshop titled "Steps to Start a Business." Attendees who are planning to start a business, or in the early stages of launching one, will learn about developing a business vision, choosing a business name, how to obtain an employer identification number, licenses and insurance.

TUESDAY, APRIL 20, 5-6 P.M. Free

Online.

INFO AND REGISTRATION: cwewbc.ecenterdirect.com/events/976717

Heading back to the future

THE R.I. HISTORICAL Preservation & Heritage Commission will hold its 35th annual Rhode Island Historic Preservation Conference, themed "Come Back to the Future." The program will include various keynote speakers and more than 15 breakout sessions and virtual tours. The conference will explore preserving the state's recent past and understanding heritage landscapes.

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 21, THROUGH FRIDAY, APRIL 23, 9 A.M. $25

Online.

INFO AND REGISTRATION: preservationconferenceri.com

Listening power

TECH COLLECTIVE WILL HOLD a workshop titled "Listening: An Underrated Superpower." Participants during the 90-minute program will learn the fundamentals of listening, including streamlining collaboration and communication, and how to get everyone on the same page. Linda Pritcher and Christine Higgins, principal consultants for Your Kind Genius, will lead the discussion.

Interested in having your business-related event included in What's Happening? Contact PBN Researcher James Bessette at (401) 680-4838 or Research@PBN.com.

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 21, 11 A.M. TO 12:30 P.M. $25/members; $40/nonmembers

Online.

INFO AND REGISTRATION: members.tech-collective.org/events/Details/listening-an-underrated-superpower-310009?sourceTypeId=Website

Building new connections

THE SOUTHERN RHODE ISLAND Chamber of Commerce will hold a Business After Hours networking session. Business professionals and entrepreneurs will have the opportunity from their home or office to meet and mingle with other professionals and build connections in a relaxed setting.

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 21, 5-6 P.M. $5/members; $10/nonmembers

Online.

INFO AND REGISTRATION: web.srichamber.com/events/Virtual-Business-After-Hours-8832/details

Video marketing

THE RHODE ISLAND Small Business Development Center will hold a workshop titled "Getting Started with Video Marketing." Attendees will have the opportunity to learn about video marketing strategy, from how to create the perfect video and handling production and post-production basics to best practices for using your video to attract and engage new and existing audiences. RISBDC marketing counselors Amanda Basse and Julie Loffredi will lead the workshop.

THURSDAY, APRIL 22, 11 A.M. TO NOON. Free

Online.

INFO AND REGISTRATION: risbdc.org/workshop.aspx?ekey=70410021

The science of networking

SCORE RHODE ISLAND will hold a workshop on how to improve and grow your business through networking. Titled "The Art and Science of Networking," attendees at the session will learn how to meet other business owners, potential suppliers or other professionals when in-person events are unavailable.

SATURDAY, APRIL 24, 9:30 A.M. TO NOON. Free

Online.

INFO AND REGISTRATION: tinyurl.com/ProvLibSeriesSpring2021

UPCOMING PBN EVENT:
The 2021 C-Suite Awards Program will be held virtually at 3 p.m. on Thursday, April 29. For more information, visit PBN.com. For sponsorship opportunities, contact Advertising@PBN.com.

Creating a STIR

THE NORTHERN RHODE ISLAND Chamber of Commerce will hold a new networking event titled STIR, the acronym for Sip, Talk, Interact and Reconnect. Complimentary appetizers and a cash bar will be offered. The event will allow businesspeople to connect and interact with one another in a casual setting. Health guidelines will be followed, and registration is required due to limited capacity.

TUESDAY, APRIL 27, 5-7 P.M. $20/members; $30/nonmembers

IL Fornello, 16 Josephine St., North Providence.

INFO AND REGISTRATION: members.nrichamber.com/event-calendar/Details/s-t-i-r-sip-talk-interact-reconnect-at-il-fornello-restaurant-319178?sourceTypeId=Website

Coming back from COVID

THE TRI-TOWN CHAMBER of Commerce will hold a workshop titled "Coming Back from COVID." Leslie Strachan, a licensed independent clinical social worker, will speak about the emotional impacts of the pandemic, particularly those working from home, and provide guidance around moving from working from home to back at the office.

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 28, NOON TO 1 P.M. $10

Online.

INFO AND REGISTRATION: tri-townchamber.org/events/details/coming-back-from-covid-6971?calendarMonth=2021-04-01

DIRECTION

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

His plan largely fell on deaf ears.

But McKee's complaint aligned with what political critics and some business owners had long said about Raimondo's overhaul of the **R.I. Commerce Corp.** after she first took office in 2015. Yes, Rhode Island's economy had improved in the years since, but critics argued that R.I. Commerce's priorities were askew, focused too much on wooing big companies to the Ocean State at the expense of smaller businesses already here.

Now Raimondo has gone to Washington, D.C., and McKee is in charge, free to set a new course at a crucial time, as the state is looking to rev up its recovery from the beating it has taken during the pandemic.

As Gov. McKee continues to settle in, questions remain about where his economic development plans are headed.

How much of his own imprint will the new governor put on R.I. Commerce as Rhode Island begins yet another uphill economic climb out of a recession? And how much does R.I. Commerce have to change to adjust to the "new normal" of a post-pandemic world?

McKee, who helped run his family's oil-delivery business and owned a Woonsocket fitness club before being elected Cumberland mayor in the early 2000s, has signaled some of what he has in mind early on.

He is using a $20 million allocation from leftover federal coronavirus relief funds to create a program that would provide struggling small businesses grants of up to $5,000.

The R.I. Commerce board approved the program in late March, and it recently started accepting applications.

In his state budget proposal submitted to the General Assembly last month, McKee also proposed changes to the $42 million Small Business Development Fund, which had been created by the legislature in 2019 as an alternative to Raimondo's job-creation programs and incentives.

The fund had been a sore spot between legislative leaders and the Raimondo administration, which at one point had labeled the program too risky. McKee is seeking changes that he says will allow more small businesses to get access to capital.

In a recent interview with PBN, McKee praised R.I. Commerce's track record in recent years of attracting high-profile companies or persuading existing ones to expand. But in the next breath, he talked about the need to "balance blue-chip companies with small businesses."

"It's not a zero-sum game," said McKee. "I think you can do both."

PRODUCT TEST: Amanda Jamieson, left, assistant professor of molecular microbiology and immunology at Brown University, holds plaque assays of GC Ink, a graphene ink developed by Graphene Composites USA Inc. that is believed to kill viruses when applied to surfaces. Brown researchers, including Delia Demers, center, and Meredith Crane, are testing the product thanks to a grant GC received from the R.I. Commerce Corp.'s Innovation Voucher Program.
COURTESY GREG SERPA

REVAMP NEEDED: Gary Sasse, founding director of the Hassenfeld Institute for Public Leadership at Bryant University, is concerned that R.I. Commerce Corp.'s tools are outdated and ill-equipped to deal with the aftermath of the coronavirus crisis.
PBN PHOTO/MICHAEL SALERNO

INCENTIVE PLAN

Raimondo had no qualms about overhauling the state's economic development program when she took office in 2015.

Her predecessor, former Gov. Lincoln D. Chafee, had a different approach to economic incentives. His focus was on growing the local economy without the heavy use of tax incentives to attract outside firms.

Raimondo claimed there were no economic development initiatives, programming and staffing when she stepped into the governor's office.

Because of the state's disastrous investment in the video game company 38 Studios a few years earlier, the General Assembly had reshaped what was then known as the Economic Development Corp. into R.I. Commerce, created an Executive Office of Commerce and added a cabinet-level chief.

Raimondo appointed Stefan Pryor, a fellow Yale University alum, as the first R.I. commerce secretary, overseeing her administration's creation of a new menu of programs and incentives designed to draw in businesses and create well-paying jobs.

R.I. Commerce's incentives have worked in many cases.

A recent success: biopharmaceutical company Amgen Inc. decided to build a $200 million next-generation biologic plant, the first in the nation, at its **Amgen Rhode Island** campus in West Greenwich after the state dangled $3.5 million in Rebuild Rhode Island tax credits and $6 million in Qualified Job tax credits spread over 10 years.

The 120,000-square-foot plant was recently completed and Amgen has added 170 people to its Rhode Island operations, 20 more than originally projected, according to David Bain, Amgen Rhode Island's business performance director.

In another case, Pryor recently touted his agency's decision in October to award a $50,000 grant to Providence-based **Graphene Composites USA Inc.**, to assist the company's production of a product that is believed to kill COVID-19 and other viruses when applied to surfaces. The grant, issued through R.I. Commerce's Innovation Voucher Program, will allow for the product to be tested by **Brown University** scientists.

Sandy Chen, company CEO and co-founder, credited the voucher program with allowing product development to go forward. "It's going to be a made-in-Rhode-Island product," Chen said.

R.I. Commerce says the Graphene Composites grant was one of seven awarded in 2020 for products related to the COVID-19 response. Since it was created by Raimondo in 2016, the Innovation Voucher Program – aimed at companies with fewer than 500 employees – has issued $4.2 million for more than 90 projects, according to the agency.

At the same time, R.I. Commerce says the Qualified Jobs Incentive Tax Credit program has been approved for more than 27 companies and helped create more than 3,000 jobs, including 300 in 2020.

And the Rebuild Rhode Island program, one of the state's largest economic development initiatives, has funneled incentives to 41 construction and renovation projects since 2016, spurring more than $2 billion in private investment, according to the agency.

Despite those successes, others have been critical, grumbling that Raimondo's economic development policies were geared toward attracting large, out-of-state employers rather than growing existing small and midsized businesses.

Tracey Beck is among the critics.

Beck is co-owner of **The Beck Cos.**, a North Smithfield-based manufacturer of stone countertops and wood cabinetry. She said the agency provided guidance with receiving three federal Paycheck Protection Program loans ranging from $100,000 to $150,000.

However, Beck said her company benefited more from **We Make RI**, a nonprofit group that matches workers with manufacturers. The organization receives funding from the **R.I. Department of Labor and Training**.

Beck said We Make RI provided funding, grants, job training and personnel. "They have been an unbelievable resource," she said.

R.I. Commerce – at least under Raimondo -- was not beneficial to Beck's business, she said.

"We received no assistance from [Raimondo]," she said. "She was not a small-business advocate at all. We got audited constantly. She was not a business-friendly governor, in my opinion."

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VALUABLE RESOURCE: Tracey Beck, right, co-owner of countertop and cabinetry manufacturer The Beck Cos., talks with manager William Marson. Beck says her company benefited greatly from We Make RI, a nonprofit that matches workers with manufacturers and provided funding, grants, job training and personnel.
PBN PHOTO/ELIZABETH GRAHAM

'URGENCY IS NEEDED'

Rhode Island's unemployment rates steadily sank from 6.7% in January 2015, when Raimondo became governor, to 3.8% in January 2020.

Just three months later, when the COVID-19 pandemic shut down the economy, the unemployment rate rocketed to 17.4%.

While that rate has dropped down to almost 7.3% as of February, Gary Sasse believes R.I. Commerce has no choice but to revamp in order to power a strong recovery.

Sasse, founding director of the Hassenfeld Institute for Public Leadership at **Bryant University**, has concerns that the agency's tools are outdated and ill-equipped to deal with the aftermath of the coronavirus crisis.

"Urgency is needed," said Sasse, who once served as director of administration and director of the **R.I. Department of Revenue** under Republican Gov. Donald L. Carierci.

"The first order of business for the new governor is to recognize that what existed before the pandemic may no longer meet the state's needs," he said. "The second thing that we have to do is to retool Commerce to be an agency that's responsive to the post-pandemic world."

The agency under Raimondo tried to retool during the pandemic "but it was slow in developing relationships with small businesses," Sasse said. "Small business has been hit the hardest."

Now, according to nonpartisan economic tracker Opportunity Insights, Rhode Island small-business "revenue has declined about 50%," he said. "We lost about 4 out of 10 small businesses [in Rhode Island]. Those are dramatic numbers."

Sasse said R.I. Commerce should provide more grants and loans to small businesses and focus on building areas of innovation, such as in digital technology.

The pandemic has "driven structural shifts" in consumer behavior and how business is conducted, he said. "The state needs economic development and policy that is responsive," he said.

CHANGE AT THE TOP?

R.I. Commerce's most visible holdover from the Raimondo administration is the man at the top: Pryor.

Some observers wondered if he would join Raimondo in Washington after President Joe Biden selected her as U.S. commerce secretary. More than a month into McKee's tenure, Pryor remains at his post.

McKee is complimentary of Pryor's performance and often includes him in economic-related public appearances and news conferences. However, the governor was cryptic recently when asked about Pryor's future at R.I. Commerce.

"I think Stefan has been a strong person in our administration," McKee told PBN in March. "We're [both] going to keep our options open. Hopefully, Stefan is going to be able to stay involved in his current position or in some other capacity."

Pryor appears to have an ally in Karl Wadensten, the no-nonsense CEO of Richmond-based manufacturer **VIBCO Inc.** and longtime R.I. Commerce Corp. board member.

If Pryor were to leave R.I. Commerce, it would be a loss for the state, Wadensten said, especially with Raimondo now leading the U.S. Commerce Department.

What other state has an economic development chief with such connections and potential insight into federal policies and access to federal programs, Wadensten said. Those connections might be particularly useful to mend ties after McKee and Raimondo clashed over her handling of the pandemic aid before she left for Washington.

"[McKee] has the perfect person – Stefan Pryor," Wadensten said. "He was just in war with her for six years. I would keep him on. I think she will be more transparent with Stefan."

For his part, Pryor deflected questions about his future in a recent interview, instead choosing to talk about the work he's doing with McKee and the state's ties to the White House.

"We are pleased to enjoy a strong relationship with the Biden administration," Pryor said. "And we are encouraged by the emphasis of President Biden and his entire economic team upon economic recovery as a major priority."

INITIAL AIMS

Pryor said the agency's focus remains on its complement of incentive programs and appealing to both large and small businesses with a "continued commitment to larger projects to drive" the economy.

Indeed, McKee's $11.2 billion state budget proposal – submitted to the General Assembly just days after he was sworn in – doesn't appear to eliminate any of Raimondo's economic development initiatives.

The spending plan for the Executive Office of Commerce includes:

■ Boosting the cap on the Rebuild RI program from $210 million to $240 million, providing a $22.5 million allocation for the program and extending the sunset on the program from June 30, 2021, to Dec. 31, 2022.

■ Adding $3 million to the budget for the Real Jobs RI training program, boosting the spending to $8.45 million.

■ Extending the sunset on the Wavemaker Fellowship grant program from June 30, 2021, to Dec. 31, 2022. The program, created under Raimondo, provides grants to science, technology, engineering and mathematics students to pay down student loans. McKee is seeking an additional $400,000 for the program.

■ Allocating $1 million for the Small Business Assistance Program, which was created by the Raimondo administration in 2016 to provide loans for businesses and entrepreneurs who would otherwise have difficulty obtaining credit. In five years, more than $4 million has been disbursed, helping to create or retain more than 1,100 jobs, according to R.I. Commerce calculations.

■ Allocating $140,000 to finance a program that provides assistance and grants to minority entrepreneurs.

Rep. Carol H. McEntee, D-South Kingstown, chairwoman of the House Small Business Committee, has taken issue with McKee's proposal to tax small businesses for forgiven federal PPP loans greater than $150,000, introducing legislation that would block such attacks.

But she likes what she sees so far in his budget plan for R.I. Commerce.

"I think it is a good first step toward helping our small businesses and state economy recover from the devastation of the COVID-19 pandemic," she said. "There has been a lot of focus on larger businesses, which we needed at the time, but right now it's small business that needs help."

Still, Wadensten said, there should be a greater emphasis on creating jobs programs that better facilitate training and job placement. "Throwing money at small businesses is great," he said, "but at the end of the day, we have people who are not getting connected with jobs that are available."

Saul Kaplan, who led the state's economic development efforts under two past governors, says McKee's ascendancy could complement what Raimondo accomplished in putting Rhode Island on the radar screen of businesses nationwide.

"It's an important transition," said Kaplan, now president of the **Business Innovation Factory**, a Providence nonprofit that promotes innovation in business models. "They're different. They come at it differently."

Kaplan said that while Raimondo's approach was "transactional," R.I. Commerce under McKee needs to focus on effecting change through policy. "We need a really good policy capability to move the economy forward," he said.

McKee "has a really good background working at the local level," Kaplan said. "That's going to be a really great superpower to get folks aligned around the state." ■

'[Gov. Daniel J. McKee] has **the perfect person** – Stefan Pryor.'

KARL WADENSTEN, VIBCO Inc. CEO and R.I. Commerce Corp. board member

Westport Middle School and High School

400 Old County Road, Westport

School is close to being in session at the town's new combined middle and high school. Construction began on the $96.8 million project in April 2019, with the building expected to be operational by the 2021-22 school year. Most of the project will be paid for by the town, with the rest being reimbursed by the state of Massachusetts. The new 187,100-square-foot building, which will house approximately 860 students, will have classrooms fitted with LED touchscreens, moveable storage units, new regulation-sized athletic fields, a courtyard, tennis courts and a memorial garden. The project also included the demolition of the old middle school. Daedalus Projects Inc. and Jonathan Levi Architects, both of Boston, are the project manager and architect, respectively. Agostini Bacon Construction Cos. of East Providence is the construction manager.

COURTESY AGOSTINI BACON CONSTRUCTION COS.

COURTESY A. AUTIELLO CONSTRUCTION CO.

Narragansett Brewing Co.

Tockwotton and India streets, Providence

Brewing tanks and other interior work is continuing at the new brewery in the city's India Point section. Ground broke on the project in November 2020, with the 20,000-square-foot brewery expected to be completed in May. The facility will serve as Narragansett Brewing's operational headquarters, on-site brewery and pub with indoor and outdoor seating. A. Autiello Construction Co. in Providence is the project manager. Herk Works Architecture of Middletown, Camera-O'Neill Consulting Engineers Inc. of Portsmouth, InSite Engineering Services of Seekonk and Peregrine Group of East Providence are also part of the construction project.

SSTAR Integrated Care Facility

Weaver Street, Fall River

What was the site of a burned-down mill is close to becoming a facility to help people within the community. Construction on the 44,500-square-foot treatment facility began in October 2020, and the building is expected to be ready for use by August. The state-of-the-art facility for the health organization that provides addiction treatment services will have amenities for primary care, behavioral health, education, research and clinical treatment. A. Autiello Construction Co. of Providence is the project manager. C.A. Pretzer & Associates Inc. of Cranston, Creative Environment Corp. of Cranston, Bohler Engineering, which has a Boston office, and Lomonaco & Pitts, Architects P.C. of Troy, N.Y., are also contracted to build the facility.

COURTESY A. AUTIELLO CONSTRUCTION CO.

MIXED REACTION: Gov. Daniel J. McKee announces the formation of a grant program for small businesses struggling in the pandemic on April 12 at Executive Cuts Barber Shop in Providence. McKee has also proposed taxing businesses on forgiven federal Paycheck Protection Program loans greater than $150,000. The idea has drawn criticism from the business community.
COURTESY R.I. GOVERNOR'S OFFICE

Tax on PPP loans 'could be devastating for us'

BY CASSIUS SHUMAN | Shuman@PBN.com

(Editor's note: A version of this story was first published on PBN.com on April 9.)

PROVIDENCE – Melody Majkut went from a feeling of relief when her business received a federal Paycheck Protection Program loan to shock after she learned that the company could be taxed on the money.

Majkut and her husband, Mark, have operated **M&G Trucking and Transportation Inc.** in Pawtucket for 27 years. The company, which delivers general freight to as far away as Texas, received two $450,000 PPP loans, which she said "arrived in the nick of time" to save the business. Now, she is concerned about the burden to the business in having to pay $45,000 in taxes on the forgiven loans.

"That could be devastating for us," said Majkut, noting that the loans have been a lifeline and kept her 30 drivers employed. "I thought it was a gift from God. Now they want us to pay a tax on it. That's a big blow."

Majkut said when the company received the PPP loans, it was instructed to use them for payroll.

"We gave it all out in payroll to our people because when the first PPP loan came, we were going to have to lay off someone that week," she said. "We did not have the work to support everybody. There was no work – everything had shut down."

The PPP loan enabled M&G Trucking to keep operating. The company has not laid off any of its employees.

In a shift from policy established before he became governor in March, Gov. Daniel J. McKee has proposed taxing forgiven PPP loans that are greater than $150,000. The governor's office said the change would generate an estimated $67.7 million in tax revenue over two years.

General Assembly leadership has so far taken a neutral position on the proposal, noting that lawmakers would be listening to the perspective of the state's small businesses.

Senate President Dominick J. Ruggerio said, "I look forward to the [Senate] Finance Committee hearing on the governor's proposal to change the tax structure regarding PPP loans, and to hearing from the small businesses who would be impacted."

House Speaker K. Joseph Shekarchi said he's aware of the governor's proposal and the concerns of the business community.

"I will review the testimony provided at the House Finance Committee hearing and the normal due diligence that is being conducted by the committee," he added.

> 'We can't punish those who were **trying to survive.**'
>
> **CAROLS E. TOBON, state representative**

At an April 7 hearing on the proposed legislation in the House, lawmakers raised questions concerning the proposed legislation, known as House bill 6121. The legislation is part of McKee's 2021 supplemental budget proposal aimed at closing the state's budget deficit.

State Rep. Carol Hagan McEntee, D-Narragansett, voiced opposition, noting she has introduced House bill 6170, which would exempt from taxation any PPP loan forgiveness. She asked McKee not to tax the approximate 2,200 businesses that could be impacted.

James Thorsen, director of the **R.I. Department of Revenue**, said at the hearing the governor's proposal would affect a small percentage of companies – "fewer than 1% of for-profit businesses with PPP loans forgiven would be impacted by this provision in 2020, and fewer than 15% in 2021."

Rep. Carlos E. Tobon, D-Pawtucket, said the percentages don't matter. "When we say that a small number of businesses will be affected, the bottom line is, they will be affected," he said.

"I have a constituent that has a successful trucking company that grosses a lot, but trucks are extremely expensive to maintain," said Tobon, referring to M&G Trucking. "As our economy was shutting down, they were using their personal income, their savings, to keep their business going in anticipation of receiving the PPP loans. Now, that would be their personal income and they have nothing to show for it because it all went out to their employees."

Thorsen responded, "Well, the fact is, you don't pay taxes if you don't make money under this program."

Tobon said that "concerns" him because companies needed the PPP loans, and a lot of the companies don't have the money to pay the tax. "They're going to have to get loans to pay back their loan."

Thorsen said "the situation is that people who didn't take [the PPP] loans pay the taxes. So, it doesn't seem fair that the people that got loans get a double tax break."

Tobon said some businesses were being prudent in not opting to take the loan, but other businesses took it to remain solvent. "We can't punish those who were trying to survive," he said.

For Majkut, the PPP loans meant keeping the doors of her business open. "I was so thankful I was able to maintain my employees," she said. The loans "did what they were supposed to do – it kept everybody employed." ■

Panel OKs rezoning for former hospital

BY NANCY LAVIN | Lavin@PBN.com

(Editor's note: A version of this story was first published on PBN.com on April 12.)

PROVIDENCE – The long-vacant St. Joseph's Hospital and surrounding Elmwood neighborhood are poised for a facelift with the city Ordinance Committee's blessing on a requested rezoning.

The committee's unanimous 5-0 vote on April 12 allows former Providence Mayor Joseph R. Paolino Jr. to advance his proposal to turn the hospital into a K-8 school, which he is donating to the city.

The rezoning request submitted by **Paolino Properties LP** involves changing nearly three dozen lots from industrial to commercial zoning. While Paolino is donating the hospital building itself, as well as the chapel and the 1.5-acre parking lot, he is retaining ownership of several other area properties that are also part of the rezoning.

Paolino

The rezoning still requires approval by the full City Council.

The vote came after a public hearing in which a small group of residents spoke. Several reiterated their desire to keep the neighborhood Peace & Plenty Community Garden, which Paolino has pledged to do, stating his intent to donate the garden to the **Southside Community Land Trust**. Others spoke about the need to retain residential use and prevent aggressive commercialization.

Paolino said his amended proposal addresses these concerns. The latest version has also further restricted the types of commercial uses the properties could have to residential, office and school purposes, parks and playgrounds or indoor or outdoor amusement, entertainment or sports facilities.

"I want to do something big for the city," said Paolino.

Councilwoman Mary Kay Harris, who represents the neighborhood, worked with Paolino on the request. What else the rezoned properties will become has not been decided, but Harris said the city is looking into affordable housing as one component.

Paolino said last year that the property was valued at $7 million. The city, as part of its recently approved fiscal 2021 school capital improvements plan, has set aside $75 million for costs associated with the new school. ■

'Hesitancy' will be next snag with vaccinations

BY MARY MACDONALD | MacDonald@PBN.com

RHODE Island will soon hit a tipping point in COVID-19 vaccinations – a point at which there will be more vaccine available than the demand for it, according to public health professionals.

And that's not necessarily a positive development.

So-called vaccine hesitancy, the term health officials use to describe reluctance or unwillingness to take a vaccine, is going to become a bigger issue in the months ahead.

The issue was discussed at the PBN Health Care Summit on April 8 by panelists who considered the potential impact on communities, as well as the state's effort to reach "herd immunity."

While the state has done a good job with its vaccine distribution overall, the issue of hesitancy is going to become more prominent by May and will represent a policy and a social challenge, said summit panelist Dr. Ashish Jha, dean of the **Brown University** School of Public Health.

"We will have a chunk of Rhode Islanders who are unvaccinated, and we'll have plenty of vaccines," Jha said. "And we will have to work really hard on issues of hesitancy, issues of access, making sure we're making it easy for people, making sure we're engaging trusted voices to become advocates for vaccinations. That is a lot of hard work. The hard work of getting people comfortable with the vaccine remains."

Until that happens, he said, "We're not going to be able to get this pandemic under full control."

Several trends have emerged in the state's progress that have caused concern:

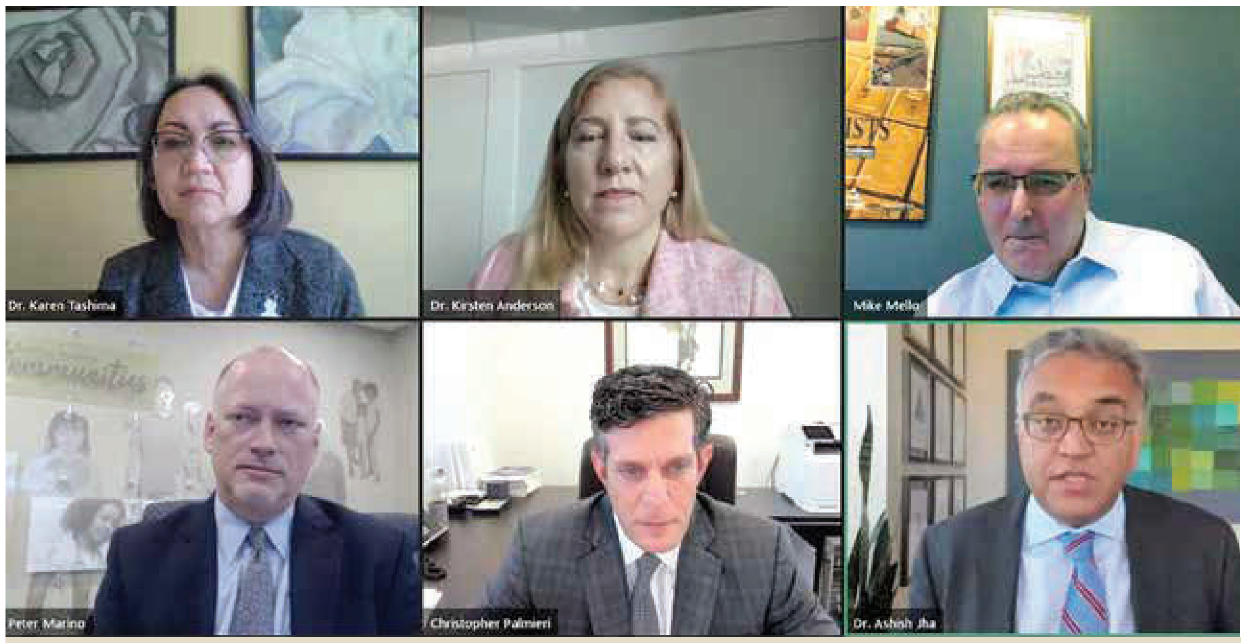
■ Women are more apt to seek vaccination than men. Gov. Daniel J. McKee said on April 8 that 60% of vaccine recipients are women; 40% are men.

■ Several communities remain under-vaccinated. Although the state has prioritized 16 high-impact ZIP codes, based on infection and hospitalization rates, in several of these communities, vaccinations are still lagging. The state is now directing more vaccines to community-operated clinics in these areas to try to increase impact.

■ Across communities, people of color and Indigenous residents also are under-vaccinated, compared with their previous exposure, which health officials use to determine risk. The state recently held its first "high-density community" vaccination day at the mass-vaccination center in Providence to try to boost rates of vaccination.

■ Retail pharmacies and mass-vaccination sites – where most of the vaccines are distributed – remain appointment-only destinations for vaccine recipients. And the vaccination system is largely dependent on access to a computer. The state only recently unveiled a registration system that allows people to be notified when an appointment is available. Those first notifications started late last week.

"We are doing everything we can to make the vaccine as accessible as possible, especially in the communities that have been harder-hit," Dr. Nicole Alexander Scott, director of the **R.I. Department of Health**, said recently. "People are encouraged to vaccinate and follow that advice when it comes from people that they know, people that they work with and people that they love."



NEXT CHALLENGE: Panelists discuss the region's rollout of the COVID-19 vaccine during the PBN Health Care Summit on April 8. Clockwise from top left is Dr. Karen Tashima, who directs clinical trials for Lifespan Corp.; Dr. Kirsten Anderson, from Aetna/CVS Health; moderator PBN Editor Michael Mello; Dr. Ashish Jha, dean of the School of Public Health at Brown University; Christopher Palmieri, CEO and president of Commonwealth Care Alliance; and Peter Marino, CEO of Neighborhood Health Plan of Rhode Island.

SEE HESITANCY
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Where does care go from here?

BY MATTHEW ENRIGHT | Contributing Writer

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC has forever altered a lot about the health care system since it first arrived in March 2020 – telemedicine, behavioral health, insurance coverage, vaccines and even waiting rooms.

Panelists who took part in the second discussion at the virtual PBN Health Care Summit on April 8 touched upon the effects that the global crisis has had on health care and what people can expect in the future as a result.

Dr. Michael Bradley, CEO and president of **Orthopedics Rhode Island Inc.**, said his company last month opened a $33 million facility in Warwick that will allow for exams, therapy, X-rays and surgical procedures.

Ortho Rhode Island spent time during the pandemic reevaluating the patient experience with an eye toward elminiating the need for waiting rooms.

"I don't ever want to go back to sitting and waiting an hour before you get called into a doctor's office; it just seems archaic," Bradley said.

Panelists also discussed what steps Rhode Island can take toward fixing problems that have been highlighted by the crisis, such as the need for health equity and increased affordability for services.

'There's **so much innovation** in primary care right now.'

DR. MATT COLLINS, Blue Cross & Blue Shield of Rhode Island chief medical officer and executive vice president

In addition to Bradley, panelists included R.I. Health Insurance Commissioner Patrick Tigue; Dr. Claire Levesque, **Tufts Health Plan** chief medical officer for commercial products; and Dr. Matt Collins, chief medical officer and executive vice president of **Blue Cross & Blue Shield of Rhode Island.**

Tigue said the priorities of increasing affordability should be to move to value-based payment plans rather than fee-for-service plans, focus on community investments outside of health to ensure that initiatives such as housing and transportation are sufficiently prioritized, and to take action on decreasing prescription drug prices.

With a drop in volume of many health services during the pandemic, medical providers suffered financially; having a system that incentivizes quality and serving patients well, Tigue said, will both help health care companies financially and assist public health.

While the COVID-19 vaccine is important, Levesque said people need to continue to seek vaccines for other illnesses.

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She noted that Tufts gave a $50 incentive to parents who brought their children to a pediatrician for a flu vaccine. "We did that because we wanted to get them back into the pediatrician and to get all their catch-up vaccines," she said. "So people were not getting their children in for the measles vaccine. We don't want to follow up a COVID pandemic with a measles pandemic."

Among the lessons learned from the pandemic was the benefits of telehealth in behavioral health. Tigue said it broke down some of the concerns about receiving behavioral health services. "I think many consumers feel more comfortable availing themselves of those services from the comfort and security of their own home," Tigue said. "I think it's a really effective strategy to potentially reduce stigma for people seeking services for that care."

Levesque cautioned that it won't be a good fit for every patient in the future.

"One example I'll give is a 16-year-old who's seeing a therapist and really doesn't want to do it from home because they don't have a private space for that," Leveque said. "So they'd rather go into the office so they can have the door closed and their parents don't hear what's happening. So how do we ensure that the new vision of behavioral health is designed so that everybody can get care in the space that's best for them?"

As technology shifts, so too will how doctors and providers think of primary care.

While some industry observers have said there's a possibility that primary care physicians and standalone practices will vanish, the panelists said that they will evolve instead.

"There's so much innovation in primary care right now because people need a first point of contact, continuous comprehensive care," Collins said. "And there's no person better to do that than the primary care provider."

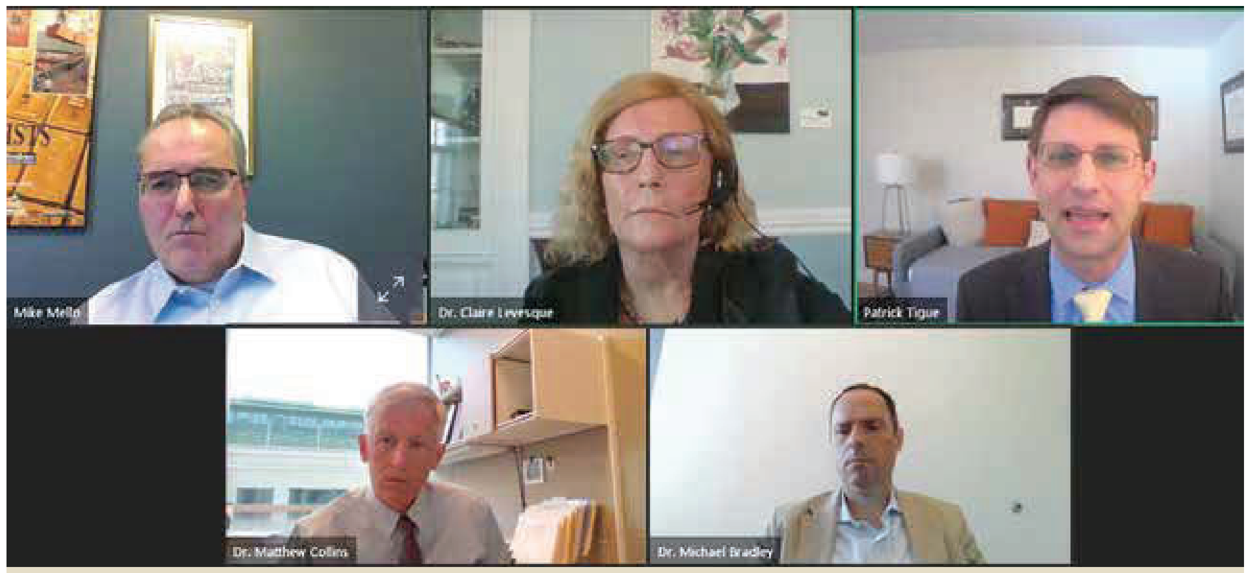
Both Collins and Levesque touched on how the insurers were working to reduce racial barriers to health equity.

"We have to be able to measure those disparities, and I would say we generally don't do a good job in the health care world of identifying that," Collins said.

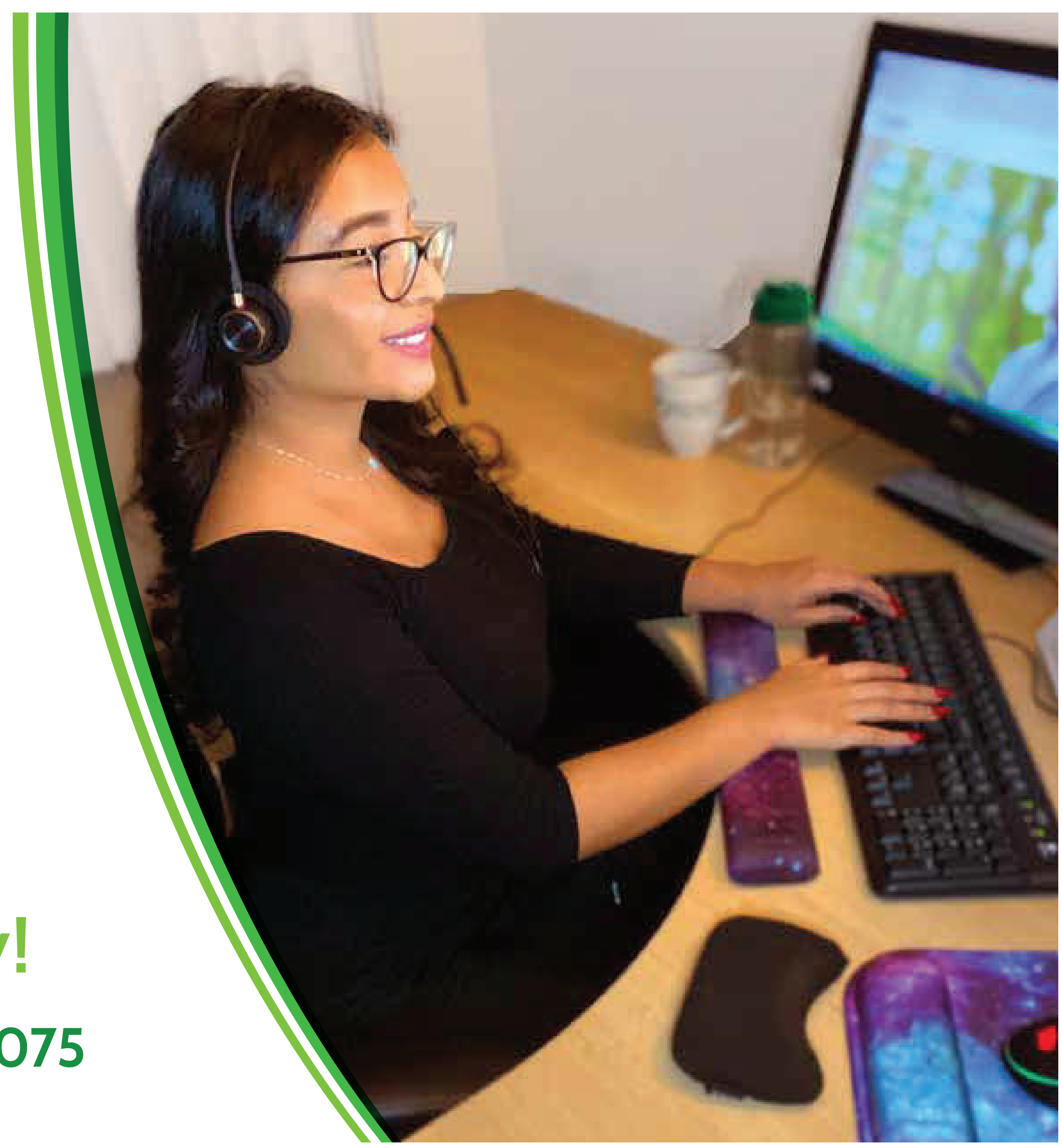
Levesque said Tufts had put together a group to work on health equity. They've worked on it in two ways: looking inward to remove unconscious bias, such as using gender-neutral language in materials distributed to their members, and working with consultants to examine Tufts' policies.

Collins also detailed the initial decision by Blue Cross & Blue Shield to no longer waive cost-share or out-of-pocket treatment for COVID-19 as of April 1. It was later reversed. Collins said the insurer originally had decided to end the waivers because of forecasts about the spread of the virus.

"We picked March 31, and we would revert to what the original plan was, which was some out-of-pocket cost-sharing," he said. When the insurer contacted customers who buy from Blue Cross and got negative feedback, it reversed the decision and extended the waiving of costs. ■



ALTERED INDUSTRY: R.I. Health Insurance Commissioner Patrick Tigue, top right, discusses the future of health care after the COVID-19 pandemic during a second panel discussion at the PBN Health Care Summit on April 8. Also participating is, clockwise from top left, moderator Michael Mello, PBN editor; Dr. Claire Levesque, Tufts Health Plan chief medical officer for commercial products; Dr. Michael Bradley, CEO and president of Orthopedics Rhode Island Inc.; and Dr. Matt Collins, chief medical officer and executive vice president of Blue Cross & Blue Shield of Rhode Island.



HESITANCY
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During the PBN summit, Dr. Karen Tashima, who directs clinical trials for **Lifespan Corp.**, and who was the principal investigator for two Remdesivir studies in Rhode Island for moderate and severe COVID-19 cases, said she is concerned that computer-based appointments remain an obstacle for many people.

"There are a significant proportion of people who are hesitant," she said. "There has been a good effort in Rhode Island to get to ZIP codes and areas of the cities where access would be predicted to be lower. But we're still not where we need to be in those areas. The challenge has been having to make appointments, having to do this online. And so many of my patients don't have the capability of doing that."

Christopher Palmieri, CEO and president of **Commonwealth Care Alliance**, which has expanded into Rhode Island, said his company has made a priority of reaching people who are homebound, and who cannot get to vaccination appointments. In Massachusetts, the company is trying to reach 25,000 people, he noted.

While the R.I. Department of Health has noted that pharmacies and clinics dispensing the vaccinations are located within a 15-minute drive of all Rhode Islanders, those appointments must be made in advance.

As part of the panel discussion, Tashima asked Dr. Kirsten Anderson, senior director of clinical solutions for New England for **Aetna Inc.**, a **CVS Health Corp.** company, whether any of the CVS pharmacies allowed walk-in inoculations. The answer was no. CVS has, however, been directing more doses to the clinic locations where its data shows people are underrepresented in being vaccinated.

Tashima said her patients often lack access to computers or tablets that would allow ease in appointments.

Primary care offices reaching out to advise patients of appointments being available would be helpful, she said.

Peter Marino, CEO of **Neighborhood Health Plan of Rhode Island**, said the state's effort to focus on equity, by distributing vaccines to community clinics and cities and towns, has brought the vaccines to locations closer to many Rhode Islanders than in other states. "As we get further down the path here, we are going to meet some of the at-risk populations that others are going to struggle with," he said. ■

'The hard work of getting people comfortable with the vaccine remains.'

DR. ASHISH JHA, Brown University School of Public Health dean

A policy that protects against human nature

BY CASSIUS SHUMAN | Shuman@PBN.com

IMAGINE wiring money to a bank account at the request of an urgent voice message or an email from your company's CEO, only to learn that the message was a sophisticated scam that just emptied the business's bank account.

That type of scam is called social engineering fraud, and it has become a commonplace threat in the business world – particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic – as thieves have evolved their schemes, making them complex and hard to detect.

And with the rise in such crimes, the demand for social engineering fraud coverage has climbed too. More businesses are seeking protection from these types of losses by adding coverage on their commercial crime insurance.

"It's been an emerging thing," said Normand Duquette, senior vice president at **RISCO Insurance Brokerage Inc.** in East Providence. "Ninety percent of the companies we see say, 'Oh, yeah. We had one of those the other week.' "

Duquette said one of RISCO's client companies bought a $1 million crime policy. The policy included $50,000 in coverage on social engineering fraud, which was subject to a $10,000 deductible.

"The client fell victim to a social engineering scam and wired $45,000 to someone impersonating a vendor," he said. "The policy paid $35,000-$45,000, less the $10,000 deductible."

Social engineering fraud commonly occurs when hackers manipulate employees into disclosing private information. Hackers take advantage of human nature to exploit a target and use an email, text or voice message that heightens a sense of urgency in the victim, which leads the victim to comply without question.

The pandemic has made it easier for criminals because many employees are working remotely, without face-to-face contact with co-workers and supervisors.

In January, the FBI issued an alert warning that hackers are increasingly using voice phishing, or "vishing," to target remote workers and to gain initial access to corporate networks.

"After gaining access to the network, many cybercriminals found they had greater network access, including the ability to escalate privileges of the compromised employees' accounts, thus allowing them to gain further access into the network, often causing significant financial damage," the FBI said.

The FBI described several incidents in which hackers successfully used social engineering techniques to target employees.

In one case, hackers targeted U.S. and international employees of an organization and used vishing techniques to collect virtual private network credentials by tricking employees to log on to webpages controlled by hackers. In another case, hackers befriended an employee in an unidentified company's chat room and duped them into revealing key information.

COMMON THREAT: Normand Duquette, senior vice president at RISCO Insurance Brokerage Inc. in East Providence, says "90% of the companies we see" have been subject to social engineering fraud attempts.
PBN PHOTO/ MICHAEL SALERNO

Duquette said perpetrators seek private information, and the common themes are: requests involving time-sensitive action steps; a person sending money thinking that they were performing a legitimate act; and a transaction that did not require a two-step verification.

Such actions aren't typically covered by traditional crime policies because the "employee dishonesty" portion of the policy isn't applicable because the duped employee is willfully transferring money. "The policy does not trigger for employee theft because for employee theft, you need criminal intent when stealing from the company," Duquette said. "That's not criminal; that's just them being bamboozled. So, the employee dishonesty coverage does not trigger."

Duquette said insurance companies started offering social engineering fraud coverage as part of a crime policy about eight or nine years ago.

Attorney Brian Lamoureux, a partner at Johnston-based **Pannone Lopes Devereaux & O'Gara LLC**, said he receives an inquiry a day from clients seeking information about the legal side of cybersecurity.

"It's a hot topic, and it's here to stay," said Lamoureux, who said that he instructs his clients to confer with a cyber consultant for an infrastructure review and have training sessions to educate employees about social engineering fraud.

Lamoureux said he feels there are gaps in the insurance marketplace for addressing fraud schemes, and businesses should have cybersecurity and crime coverage to recover losses from fraud by a third party.

The problem, he said, is "when an innocent employee gets socially engineered to take an action they are authorized to take. Under most fraud/crime policies, losses are usually limited to fraud schemes where the insured was unaware of them and did not actively participate in them. So, under [this] scenario, the employee actively, but innocently, participated in the scheme."

In these cases, Lamoureux said insurers could have a strong argument to deny coverage.

Duquette said policies that include social engineering fraud coverage fill this gap, providing coverage where it might not exist for businesses.

Prevention should also be a focus. Lamoureux said human resources departments should provide information to employees – particularly new hires – warning them of the potential threats and how to handle them.

"I don't see a lot of people going to new hires on their first day and reminding them that they might be fertile ground for bad actors who are waiting for a trusting, diligent new employee to target," Lamoureux said. ■

'It's been **an emerging thing.**'

NORMAND DUQUETTE, RISCO Insurance Brokerage Inc. senior vice president

PAYOUTS

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His business losses were compounded because he lost immediate sales and future bookings when his insurer didn't help him, he said, and he had to cancel several long-term contracts.

"The world came to a screeching halt," Millonzi said of spring of 2020 when events and gatherings were shut down by the state government. "I think that week, I had $40,000 to $50,000 in sales that just stopped."

Helping small businesses that lost significant revenue due to the pandemic has largely fallen on state and federal programs. The insurance industry has fought – successfully, so far – most of the claims for business interruption filed by policyholders, according to lobbyists who appeared before an R.I. House committee in late February, fighting against a bill that would require insurers to cover businesses for those pandemic losses.

The measure, filed by Rep. Joseph M. McNamara, D-Warwick, has been put aside for "further study." McNamara did not respond to phone calls seeking comment.

His bill would require companies with business-interruption policies to be indemnified by their insurance companies if they had losses related to the pandemic. The legislation would apply to restaurants, retailers and other businesses that could not document "property damages." That lack of documentation has been used by insurers to reject claims for business interruption.

"If insurance companies are going to aggressively sell these products, they should step up to the plate and deliver on their promises," McNamara said in a news release when he filed the bill.

Several insurance company lobbyists appeared at the House Corporations Committee hearing on the bill in February and urged legislators to defeat it, saying that to require insurers to cover pandemic-related losses would bankrupt them.

It's a multibillion-dollar fight over insurance coverage for pandemic-related losses that is being waged across the country.

About 2,000 cases in the U.S. have been litigated by businesses trying to claim losses against insurers, said Frank O'Brien, vice president of government affairs for the American Property Casualty Insurance Association. Two major cases have been filed so far in Rhode Island, he noted, but he did not identify them.

In early March, the well-known restaurant chain **Legal Sea Foods**, which has a location in Cranston, lost a lawsuit against its insurer after a federal judge found the company had no "direct physical loss of or damage" to its property, according to media reports.

Other businesses have similarly failed this year.

A suit filed in March 2020 against Lloyd's of London by the New Orleans restaurant Oceana Grill was decided in favor of the insurer in late February.

PREPPING FOR A FIGHT: Kevin Millonzi, owner of Millonzi Fine Catering in West Warwick, says his insurance claims for losses related to COVID-19 have been turned down. Now he's ready to sue.
PBN PHOTO/MICHAEL SALERNO

The pandemic has inspired insurers to rewrite their policies to protect against claims for future pandemic-borne losses.

In the cases making it into courts now, the burden is clearly on the businesses because of the contract terms, O'Brien said. "Ninety-eight to ninety-nine percent of them are finding in favor of insurers," he said.

The reason? Most of the cases that have been tossed out so far involve virus-exclusion clauses, meaning the insurer is not obligated to cover the losses associated with COVID-19. In other cases, insurers have argued the pandemic hasn't caused physical damage or loss required for a payout.

"Tragically, millions of businesses across the country have closed their doors because of government-ordered shutdowns," Matthew Sturdevant, spokesman for The Hartford, said in response to a PBN inquiry about Millonzi's situation. "Unfortunately, viruses are generally outside the scope of business-interruption coverage. These policies do not cover this exposure and, accordingly, premiums were never collected for it."

'Many insurers would likely **become insolvent.**'

FRANK O'BRIEN, American Property Casualty Insurance Association vice president of government affairs

To allow businesses to receive payouts would harm the insurance industry, O'Brien said. "Many insurers would likely become insolvent, perhaps in a matter of months, if forced to pay business-interruption claims arising out of the COVID-19 pandemic," O'Brien said.

Rory Whelan, a regional vice president for the National Association of Mutual Insurance Companies, also urged rejection of the bill, saying it was unconstitutional.

Millonzi also doesn't see much hope in the state legislation, but he appreciates the effort. In his case, he is hoping his virus coverage sways the court, or perhaps his insurance company. His attorney is Robert Goldberg, of Pawtucket, a former state Senate minority leader.

Millonzi said he plans to try to get some payout from his insurance company.

Educated at **Johnson & Wales University**, Millonzi opened his catering business, along with a restaurant, more than 11 years ago. He's since closed the restaurant, unrelated to the pandemic, and had been using the space for small events.

He employed about 28 people before the pandemic. That number is now about six.

When he hears people talking about the economy reopening, he is skeptical. In catering, the business bookings are coming back, but it's happening slowly.

"People have to start booking," he said. "I think I have a good case. I look at the insurance bills. Why do you have it? You have it in case something terrible happens." ■

FOCUS | RHODE ISLAND INDEPENDENT INSURANCE AGENCIES (ranked by number of employees)

2021 rank	Company | Website CEO/President	Address Phone	No. of employees	Types of insurance written
1 2020: 1	**Hilb Group of New England** | hilbgroupne.com Robert F. Calise, president of benefits; Joseph J. Padula, president of property and casualty	931 Jefferson Blvd. Warwick, R.I. 02886 (800) 232-0582	190	Employee benefits advisory, HR consulting, property and casualty, retirement planning
2 2020: 2	**Starkweather & Shepley Insurance Brokerage Inc.** | starshep.com Lawrence E. Keefe, chairman and CEO	60 Catamore Blvd. East Providence, R.I. 02914 (401) 435-3600	141	Casualty, commercial, employee benefits, personal, property, risk management services, surety bonding
3 2020: 3	**Cross Insurance Rhode Island** | crossagency.com Gary E. Heaslip, president	376 Newport Ave. East Providence, R.I. 02916 (401) 431-9200	62	All lines, including commercial, health, life, personal
4 2020: 4	**OceanPoint Insurance Agency** | oceanpointins.com Douglas K. Mayhew	500 West Main Road Middletown, R.I. 02842 (401) 847-5200	60	Commercial, life and benefits, personal
5 2020: 6	**Carey, Richmond & Viking Insurance** | crvinsurance.com V. David Andrade, president	2 Corporate Place Middletown, R.I. 02842 (401) 683-3900	49	Coastal and high net worth residential, construction, cyber, financial institutions, flood, independent schools, marine, manufacturing
6 2020: 9	**Brokers' Service Marketing Group LLC** | bsmg.net Jason E. Lea, CEO	500 South Main St. Providence, R.I. 02903 (401) 751-9400	40	Annuities, life insurance and long-term care insurance to financial-service individuals and institutions
6 2020: 7	**Gallo|Thomas Insurance Agency Inc.** | gallothomas.com Thomas J. DiSanto	125 Metro Center Blvd., Suite 3001 Warwick, R.I. 02886 (401) 732-9100	40	All lines, including personal, commercial, life and health
8 2020: 7	**Butler & Messier Insurance** | butlerandmessier.com Roger L. Messier, president	1401 Newport Ave. Pawtucket, R.I. 02861 (401) 728-3200	38	Commercial and personal insurance, including employee benefits and health plans
9 2020: 11	**Loiselle Insurance Agency** | loiselleinsurance.com Robert B. Loiselle, president; Brenda Loiselle-Marcotte and Melanie Loiselle-Mongeon, vice presidents	279 Dexter St. Pawtucket, R.I. 02860 (401) 723-8510	24	Commercial and personal insurance
10 2020: 14	**Thompson Insurance Group** | thompsoninsurancegroup.net Kenneth Thompson, CEO	2761 Pawtucket Ave. East Providence, R.I. 02914 (401) 434-7203	22	Auto, business, flood, homeowners, life, property, surety bonds, workers' compensation
11 2020: NL	**Aon** [1] | aon.com Christa R. Davies, executive vice president and chief financial officer	100 Westminster St. Providence, R.I. 02903 (401) 331-7700	20	Health and benefits, property and casualty, reinsurance
12 2020: 15	**Woodmansee Insurance Inc.** | woodmanseeins.com Ralph H. Woodmansee, president, personal lines	1122 Main St. Richmond, R.I. 02898 (401) 539-7000	17	Commercial and personal
13 2020: 17	**Doorley Agency Inc.** | doorleyagency.com Mark C. Doorley, president; Matthew P. Doorley, vice president	17 Sixth Ave. East Greenwich, R.I. 02818 (401) 886-9600	15	Auto, business owners, casualty, commercial, general liability, home, inland marine, life, property, renters, umbrella, workers' compensation
13 2020: 15	**Hunter Insurance Inc.** | hunterinsurance.net Brian M. Hunter, president	389 Old River Road Lincoln, R.I. 02838 (401) 769-9500	15	Auto, commercial, home, business, life
15 2020: 19	**Lathrop Insurance Agency Inc.** | lathropinsurance.com Dan L. Lathrop, president	85A Beach St. Westerly, R.I. 02891 (401) 596-2525	14	Solutions for complex personal and commercial insurance
15 2020: 12	**WD & Associates Inc.** | wdandassociates.com William M. Delmage	34 Hemingway Drive East Providence, R.I. 02915 (401) 435-4239	14	Benefits consulting analysis, claims projection, group benefits, HR consulting, strategic planning
17 2020: 17	**Rose & Kiernan Inc.** | rkinsurance.com John C. Tickner, senior vice president	138 Main St. South Kingstown, R.I. 02879 (401) 782-1800	12	Specializes in construction, group health and benefits, social services, health care, workers' compensation and surety
18 2020: 23	**Paolino Insurance Agency Inc.** Gregory A. Paolino Jr., president	100 Westminster St. Providence, R.I. 02903 (401) 421-2588	6	Professional liability
19 2020: NL	**Shove Insurance** | shove.com William J. Hunt, CEO	1401 Newport Ave. Pawtucket, R.I. 02861 (401) 728-3200	3	Auto, commercial property, health, home, life, personal, property and liability, workers' compensation

CLOSER LOOK

Total number of employees:

782

LIST RESEARCHED BY
James Bessette

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UPCOMING LISTS
April 30: Addiction Treatment Centers, Estate Planners, Hospitals; May 14: Rhode Island Distilleries, Breweries and Vineyards, Rhode Island's Largest SBA Loans, Rhode Island SBA Lenders

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NL = Not listed last year.

FOOTNOTE
[1] Formerly Aon Risk Services Northeast Inc.

Battery sales energized by reimbursements

BY NANCY LAVIN | Lavin@PBN.com

TYLER Mason has made a career out of renewable energy.

But it wasn't until last summer that Mason, who serves as vice president and installation manager for **Sol Power LLC**, invested in a battery energy storage system for his home in Westerly.

The reason for his delay? The price. The lithium-ion batteries aren't cheap.

Indeed, the two batteries, which are the size of mini-fridges and are designed to store the power harnessed by his solar panels, cost $20,000, Mason estimated. But unlike in the past, he now felt the price was worth it, thanks to reimbursements for energy his batteries discharged back into the power grid.

The payment, through **National Grid**'s ConnectedSolutions program, is one of several financial incentives aimed at increasing battery energy storage for residential and commercial uses in Rhode Island and across the nation. And so far, it's working.

"Before, batteries were kind of a luxury-market item, but with these incentives, they're more cost-effective than generators," said Eric Beecher, founder of Sol Power. The Charlestown-based company, which offers solar and battery storage installations, has seen demand for battery storage systems paired with solar arrays skyrocket: 100 in the last year, compared with about five over the five years before that.

Nationwide, the fourth quarter of 2020 brought in 700 megawatts in new energy storage projects – a majority of which are battery storage systems – up 37% over the prior quarter and almost 3.5 times as much as the fourth quarter of 2019, according to a report by Wood Mackenzie, an energy research group.

In Rhode Island, quarter-over-quarter increases have been small since 2018, but the **R.I. Office of Energy Resources** forecasts a pipeline of 80 projects totaling 2,200 kilowatts of power over the coming years.

Battery storage is crucial to decarbonizing and increasing renewable energy, including hitting Rhode Island's ambitious 100% renewable by 2030 target. It also provides power to property owners during severe weather or disaster-related outage events.

Resiliency during outages was the main reason why customers in Rhode Island were adding battery energy storage systems to their homes, according to a National Grid survey.

BACKUP SYSTEM: Tyler Mason, vice president and installation manager for Sol Power LLC, has installed backup batteries and a converter box in his Westerly home to provide electricity to the house during an outage.
PBN PHOTO/ ELIZABETH GRAHAM

For National Grid, the main benefit is in reducing demand on the grid during peak times.

The ConnectedSolutions program, which began in 2019, pays residential and commercial customers to discharge power from their battery storage systems. There are regularly scheduled discharge dates, designed around expected peak usage, such as hot summer nights when air conditioners are on full blast. A residential customer with a 5.5-kilowatt battery system could earn up to $2,200 a year, according to Paul Wassink, National Grid senior engineer and demand response manager.

To further cut costs for prospective battery storage system participants, OER in October launched its own incentive program, offering $2,000 grants through **R.I. Commerce Corp.**'s Renewable Energy Fund to cover upfront costs of small solar and battery-paired projects – and up to $40,000 for larger, commercial projects.

The U.S. Department of Energy through its investment tax credit also allows home and business owners to deduct 26% of the cost of battery storage systems from their federal taxes, although the batteries must be tied to a solar project to qualify. Legislation introduced by U.S. Rep. Michael Doyle, D-Pa., would expand the federal credits to apply to standalone battery storage projects, too.

Jason Burwen, interim CEO for the Washington, D.C.-based U.S. Energy Storage Association, said the legislation would be "catalytic" for states such as Rhode Island that have goals for decarbonizing and increasing renewable energy alternatives.

Current incentives that require battery storage in conjunction with a renewable energy system can leave out people who don't own their homes – and don't have authority to add rooftop solar panels, for example – or those who live in areas where sun or wind can't be harnessed for power.

The legislation also stimulates research into how to improve the technology – for batteries and other systems such as thermal and hydro-powered storage.

"A grid that moves expeditiously to clean energy technology is not just going to have battery storage, but it is also going to need incentives to develop that next generation of storage technology as well," Burwen said.

Battery storage remains the most accessible and affordable option in part because the technology is well-tested and recognized, and because market demand has increased availability, Wassink said.

But batteries can only hold a limited amount of energy for a short time. Long-term seasonal energy storage will present "significant challenges to balancing a heavily weighted renewable energy generation portfolio," according to a 2020 OER report reviewing how Rhode Island can achieve the 100% renewable energy by 2030 goal.

"Right now, we're just starting to really kick-start the market," said Carrie Gill, OER's administrator for grid modernization and systems integration. "We know it's going to take a lot more going forward." ■

'Right now, we're just starting to really **kick-start the market.**'

CARRIE GILL, R.I. Office of Energy Resources administrator for grid modernization and systems integration

Crisis exposes depths of the 'digital divide'

BY MARY MACDONALD | MacDonald@PBN.com

WHEN MAGDALENA ANDREOZZI MOVED workshops offered by her nonprofit online during the COVID-19 pandemic last summer, she expected some bumps in the transition.

After all, **Grands Flourish Inc.** helps grandparents who are raising their grandchildren, and the virtual world can be a tricky place for older people to navigate. But it was much worse than Andreozzi imagined.

The grandparents who had come to count on her organization for social support were not able to get online at all. She later learned through a phone survey that most of them didn't have a smartphone, tablet or computer of any kind.

"Of course, they didn't show up," Andreozzi said of the virtual forum that drew no attendees. "They only have a flip phone."

How is this possible in 2021? It's not only possible, it's common in Rhode Island, according to technology-equity advocates. What is being termed a "digital divide" between the haves and have-nots has become only more visible in the pandemic.

According to a Pew Research Center survey, more than 41% of adults age 65 and older are not using high-speed wireless internet connections and 25% do not use the internet at all.

Using state grant funds, 10 organizations in Rhode Island are now accessing technology to help bridge that gap. The program put forward by the **R.I. Office of Healthy Aging** will direct $200,000 to various caregiver programs, helping elderly and disabled community members and their families to access digital technology. The grants of $10,000 to $30,000 will provide devices, internet service and training on the new technology.

Grands Flourish, a West Warwick-based nonprofit, serves grandparents who often unexpectedly were placed in the role of primary caregiver to their grandchildren. Many of its grandparents are in their 60s or 70s and are raising children under age 10. The $22,000 grant it received through the state's digiAGE program will be put toward buying tablets or laptops, as well as wireless connections, for 12 grandparents.

Each of these grandparents will be paired with a one-on-one mentor who will walk them through the steps to get online and use the technology, Andreozzi said. She recently partnered with Cyber Seniors, a program at the **University of Rhode Island**, and **Mentor Rhode Island: The RI Mentoring Partnership Inc.** to help make the program roll out smoothly.

The pandemic thrust many grandparents into an unknown world of online education and having to quickly understand technology platforms. In Rhode Island, about 13,000 children are living with their grandparents and 7,000 children do not have a primary parent in the home, she said.

"We have all of these people, who are at home, raising children, and all of a sudden they are just completely isolated," Andreozzi said.

Rosamaria Amoros Jones, director of the Office of Healthy Aging, said technology gaps took on greater importance in 2020 when the pandemic forced many people into isolation and prevented them from interacting with extended family.

Even before the pandemic, digital inequities were being experienced most frequently by adults over 55, family caregivers and adults living with disabilities, she said. That's about 300,000 people in Rhode Island.

People who lack access or understanding of how to use online functions, including email, social media and platforms such as Zoom, are in all communities in Rhode Island, rural and urban.

"You have all of these folks who are not digital natives. They were not

CONTINUES ON PAGE 29

'You have all of these folks who are **not digital natives.**'

ROSAMARIA AMOROS JONES, R.I. Office of Healthy Aging director

FOCUS | SOFTWARE DEVELOPMENT COMPANIES (ranked by number of local employees)

2021 rank	Company | Website CEO/President	Address Phone	No. of local employees	Specialty	Year founded
1 2020: 1	**Systems Engineering Associates Corp.** [1] | seacorp.com Brian Gilligan, CEO; David Lussier, president	62 Johnnycake Hill Road Middletown, R.I. 02842 (401) 847-2260	**465**	Systems and software engineering and development	1981
2 2020: 2	**Virgin Pulse Inc.** | virginpulse.com David Osborne, CEO	75 Fountain St. Providence, R.I. 02902 (401) 537-6300	**350**	Systems and software for the health care industry	2004
3 2020: 4	**Rite-Solutions Inc.** | rite-solutions.com Dennis McLaughlin	1 Corporate Place, 2nd Floor Middletown, R.I. 02842 (401) 847-3399	**215**	Cybersecurity, engineering/information technology services, software and systems design/analysis, web development	2000
4 2020: 5	**Purvis Systems Inc.** | purvis.com Joseph Drago, CEO	88 Silva Lane Middletown, R.I. 02842 (401) 849-4750	**103**	Defense expertise, engineering services, field services, hardware development, systems integration	1973
5 2020: 6	**CAI Software LLC** [2] | caisoft.com Brian Rigney, CEO	36 Thurber Blvd. Smithfield, R.I. 02917 (401) 232-2600	**56**	Anti-spam services, antivirus, cloud services, data backup, Office 365, server and desktop management	1978
6 2020: 7	**Envision Technology Advisors LLC** | envisionsuccess.net Todd Knapp, founder and CEO	999 Main St., Suite 715 Pawtucket, R.I. 02860 (401) 272-6688	**54**	Data and endpoint security, employee security posture training and measurement, third-party validation	1998
7 2020: 8	**Vertikal6** | vertikal6.com Rick Norberg, CEO	30 Service Ave. Warwick, R.I. 02886 (401) 825-4400	**52**	Backup/disaster recovery, information technology compliance, Office 365, server/network management, software development	2010
8 2020: 11	**Brave River Solutions Inc.** | braveriver.com Jim McAssey, president	875 Centerville Road Warwick, R.I. 02886 (401) 828-6611	**30**	Cloud computing, enterprise resource planning and business process consulting, help-desk support, information technology assessments, IT project management, outsourced chief information officer	2000
9 2020: 10	**ProProducts Web Development** | ppwd.com Vincent Marcantonio, president	9 Thurber Blvd. Smithfield, R.I. 02917 (401) 231-7793	**28**	Application programming interface and custom integrations, custom programming, Headless e-commerce, Magento e-commerce	1999
10 2020: 12	**ChartWise Medical Systems Inc.** | chartwisemed.com Steven Mason	1174 Kingstown Road South Kingstown, R.I. 02879 (888) 493-4502	**15**	Medical documentation software	2009
11 2020: 15	**The Mullings Group LLC** | themullingsgroup.com Keno Mullings, CEO; Tanya Jones, vice president of operations	166 Valley St. Providence, R.I. 02909 (617) 299-6871	**10**	Software development and testing, technology consulting	2014
12 2020: NL	**Trilix** | trilixtech.com Tim Hebert, founder and CEO	100 Midway Road, Suite 5 Cranston, R.I. 02920 (401) 285-8900	**8**	Business intelligence, customer experience, software and app development, systems integration, web solutions	2017
12 2020: 14	**Creative Circle Media Solutions** | creativecirclemedia.com Bill Ostendorf, founder and president	945 Waterman Ave. East Providence, R.I. 02914 (401) 455-1555	**8**	Custom software development and hosting, print design and production, website content management system products, web redesigns	2004

CLOSER LOOK

Total number of employees:
1,397

LIST RESEARCHED BY
James Bessette

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UPCOMING LISTS
April 30: Addiction Treatment Centers, Estate Planners, Hospitals; May 14: Rhode Island Distilleries, Breweries and Vineyards, Rhode Island's Largest SBA Loans, Rhode Island SBA Lenders

WANT TO JOIN?
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NL = Not listed last year.

FOOTNOTES
① Also known as SEA Corp.; was acquired by Roy Kapani, founder of ECS, on March 19.

② Also known as Computer Associates.

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 27

raised in the tech era and so, therefore, are being left behind," Jones said.

The COVID-19 response, including testing and vaccinations, has also had a heavy tech focus. "Vaccination scheduling is one of the most recent examples of a system that is tech-enabled," Jones said.

In addition to Grands Flourish, the digiAGE program awarded grants to nonprofits, including $20,576 to **Carelink Inc.** in East Providence to support caregivers of adult day health center participants; $17,000 to **Cornerstone Adult Services Inc.** in Warwick to partner with colleges to educate caregivers on remote teaching and learning; $10,000 to **Center for Southeast Asians** in Providence to help the elderly connect with family and friends and combat social isolation; and $16,750 to the town of Cumberland to support digital literacy and connect older residents to health information.

The largest recipient was the **YMCA of Greater Providence**, which received $27,679 to assist older residents in neighborhoods hard-hit by the pandemic, to help them access digital tools and training.

The digiAGE program goes well beyond just the technology, according to Jones. If someone is handed a device, they may not know how to use it effectively, or how to access culturally relevant programs.

"It can't just be about the devices," she said.

It started with a project launched in April 2020, Project Hello, that was an effort to connect volunteers to homebound residents.

"We understood the threat of social isolation," Jones said. "How could we launch an initiative that would get people devices that were user-centric – meaning appropriate for that individual and feature-rich. So, if it was an iPad, it would have apps. And then train the person to use that service and pay for the internet."

To help finance the initiative, the state office partnered with private entities. The grants that were awarded came from a larger $600,000 program that includes money from the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security Act, as well as contributions from organizations and companies such as **Verizon Communications Inc.**, **Tech Collective**, **Cox Communications Inc.** and **Neighborhood Health Plan of Rhode Island**, Jones said. ■

SPANNING THE GAP: Magdalena Andreozzi, founder of Grands Flourish Inc., says many of the grandparents her organization supports lost contact when many group functions switched to online-only after the COVID-19 pandemic struck. Now Andreozzi is using a grant to get those people reconnected.
PBN PHOTO/MICHAEL SALERNO

FOCUS | WEB DEVELOPMENT FIRMS (ranked by number of web developers)

2021 rank	Company | Website CEO/President	Address Phone	Web developers Employees	Services offered
1 2020: 1	**ProProducts Web Development** | ppwd.com Vincent Marcantonio, president	9 Thurber Blvd. Smithfield, R.I. 02917 (401) 231-7793	**21** 28	Digital marketing, e-commerce, Magento, Shopify, Big Commerce, merchandising, search engine marketing, web design and development
2 2020: 3	**Envision Technology Advisors LLC** | envisionsuccess.net Todd S. Knapp, founder and CEO	999 Main St., Suite 715 Pawtucket, R.I. 02860 (401) 272-6688	**18** 54	Business continuity, business and information technology consulting, cloud and managed services, cybersecurity, web design and development
3 2020: 3	**Brave River Solutions Inc.** | braveriver.com Jim McAssey, president	875 Centerville Road Warwick, R.I. 02886 (401) 828-6611	**17** 30	Custom software and app development, paid search and social media management, search engine optimization, systems integration, web hosting and support
4 2020: 9	**Ninedot LLC** | ninedot.com Mark Bevington, CEO and director of purpose	225 Dyer St., 2nd Floor Providence, R.I. 02903 (401) 274-4200	**6** 6	Growth-marketing agency, including headless e-commerce, HubSpot, hosting services, social media, website design and development
4 2020: 6	**RDW Group** | rdwgroup.com Phil Loscoe Jr., chairman and managing partner	125 Holden St. Providence, R.I. 02908 (401) 521-2700	**6** 51	Advertising, branding, digital, e-marketing, media buying and planning, public relations, social media, website development
6 2020: 7	**Xzito** [1] | xzito.com Jeshua Zapata, president; Jairo Gomez, client services director; Juan Gomez, web director	2820 Hartford Ave. Johnston, R.I. 02919 (401) 709-7342	**5** 8	Helps organizations increase revenue growth, improve cost reductions and drive user engagement
6 2020: 7	**PMC Media Group** | pmcne.com Darren Jodoin, president	694 Main St. East Greenwich, R.I. 02818 (401) 667-7777	**5** 16	Web design and development, e-commerce, custom software and app development, search engine optimization, web maintenance, search engine marketing, digital marketing, web hosting
6 2020: 14	**Logicomm Inc.** | logicomm-inc.com Jim Van, partner; Peter Petrovich, director of security	111 Irving Ave. Providence, R.I. 02906 (401) 369-8730	**5** 12	Cybersecurity, full-stack development, hosting, remediation, site design
6 2020: 9	**Creative Circle Media Solutions** | creativecirclemedia.com Bill Ostendorf, founder and president	945 Waterman Ave. East Providence, R.I. 02914 (401) 455-1555	**5** 8	Custom website and content management system development for media, associations and businesses, including an extensive suite of specialized software, design expertise and strategic consulting
10 2020: 9	**5kMedia** | 5kMedia.com Russell Reis, owner	1246 Ten Rod Road Exeter, R.I. 02822 (800) 268-8336	**4** 8	Online marketing, responsive web development, hosting and print/promotional product services
10 2020: 14	**Trailblaze Marketing** | trailblaze.marketing Christopher Parisi, founder and president	333 Westminster St., Suite 200 Providence, R.I. 02903 (401) 753-7470	**4** 11	Website design and development, and marketing services
12 2020: 18	**Vertikal6** | vertikal6.com Rick Norberg, CEO	30 Service Ave. Warwick, R.I. 02886 (401) 825-4400	**3** 52	Fluent in the most common front-end, back-end, database-tier and business intelligence languages, including HTML5, CSS3, JavaScript, ASP.NET, PHP, SQLServer, MySQL, VB.NET, C#, SSRS, SharePoint and PowerBI
12 2020: 5	**GLAD WORKS INC.** | gladworks.com Gina L. DiSpirito, founder, principal and creative director	545 Pawtucket Ave., Studio C208 Pawtucket, R.I. 02860 (401) 724-4523	**3** 11	Copywriting, Drupal, e-marketing, iPhone, mobile-app, social media campaigns and strategies, Wordpress design and development
12 2020: 14	**Luminous Creative Agency** | luminous.agency Bryan Roberts, founder and creative director; Ryan Buttie, founder	220 South Main St. Providence, R.I. 02903 (401) 234-9407	**3** 11	Custom web applications, user experience and interface design, website design and development, Wordpress development
15 2020: 18	**Streicker & Co.** | streicker.com Paul Streicker, president	37 Eastern Ave. East Providence, R.I. 02914 (401) 435-0200	**2** 3	Website design, search engine optimization, interactive approaches as part of overall marketing plans
15 2020: NL	**Roplab IT Solutions LLC** | roplab.com Raphael O. Okelola, president and solutions architect	2 Devon St. Providence, R.I. 02904 (401) 369-7116	**2** 2	Application/software development services, intranet, extranet with data-driven functionality, project management services
17 2020: 18	**Sidewalk Branding Co.** | sidewalkbranding.co Chris Sheehy, founding president	P.O. Box 16263 East Providence, R.I. 02916 (401) 481-4939	**1** 2	Offering B2B and reseller search engine optimization, local marketing, keyword research, pay-per-click advertising on Google and Microsoft channels

CLOSER LOOK

Total number of web developers:
110

Re-ranked by number of employees:

1
Envision Technology Advisors LLC
No. of employees: **54**

2
Vertikal6
No. of employees: **52**

3
RDW Group
No. of employees: **51**

LIST RESEARCHED BY
James Bessette

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NL = Not listed last year.

FOOTNOTES
① Formerly known as Xzito Creative Solutions LLC.

Emmons named Banker of the Year

TOP BANKER: David Emmons, vice president and commercial loan officer at Rockland Trust Co., was named 2020 Banker of the Year by the South Eastern Economic Development Corp. At right is Laurie Driscoll, vice president and commercial loan officer at SEED Corp.

COURTESY SOUTH EASTERN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT CORP.

DAVID EMMONS of **Rockland Trust Co.** on Dec. 10 was named the 2020 Banker of the Year by the **South Eastern Economic Development Corp.** Emmons, who has served as vice president and a commercial loan officer at the bank since 2017, partnered with SEED on financing projects during fiscal 2020, demonstrating his participation in facilitating the U.S. Small Business Administration's 504 program, which aided the small-business community during the COVID-19 pandemic.

What was your reaction to being named SEED's 2020 Banker of the Year?
I was very grateful to receive this recognition from SEED. Rockland Trust has had a long and successful partnership with SEED and I was honored to be recognized as Banker of the Year. I could not have done it alone, however, and I would like to recognize the dedicated team of lenders within SEED. They have gone above and beyond during this pandemic, ensuring businesses received the attention, support and capital that was critical for them to keep their doors open.

What led you to pursue a career in the banking industry?
I knew early on that I wanted to work in accounting and finance after graduating. During college I worked as a summer teller at Rockland Trust and was immediately drawn to the culture. Following graduation, the bank offered me a position as a staff accountant. This was a fantastic starting role, as I had the opportunity to learn the functions of a commercial bank and how different departments contribute to the bank's financial performance.

How important is it for businesses to have a lifeline during the pandemic through programs such as the SBA's 504 program?
Accessibility to programs through the SBA have been essential for businesses of all sizes throughout the pandemic. Businesses who took part in the 504 program received a benefit in the CARES [Coronavirus, Aid, Relief and Economic Security] Act, where the SBA portion of the loan payment was subsidized by the government. This was a major lift for borrowers, who in many cases were forced to close as states rolled out restrictions in response to the pandemic. Additionally, the Paycheck Protection Program allowed businesses to keep their employees on payroll, despite significant reductions to their bottom lines. The current economic conditions are difficult to assess with the mixing of government stimulus, state restrictions and consumer uncertainty. The road to recovery will continue to be bumpy.

What do you hope to leave as your legacy working in the banking industry?
It is very rewarding to work with businesses on the path to achieving their financial goals. Whether this means hitting a sales target, expanding their product line, or purchasing a building – business owners are undoubtedly passionate about what they do. I would like to build a legacy where my customers do not consider me as just their banker but also their trusted adviser. The businesses I serve are the lifeblood of the communities they are in and helping them achieve their version of success … is my ultimate goal. ■

MACKAY'S MORAL | HARVEY MACKAY

In praise of caregivers

SEEMS LIKE EVERY conversation these days begins with "How are you doing?" or "Are you managing to keep busy during lockdown?" and ends with "Stay safe!"

Those questions have taken on new meaning for me, as I was recently hospitalized for 14 days with COVID-19. I am recovering well, thanks to wonderful medicines and incredibly attentive care by a team of doctors, nurses and hospital staff, who I am guessing were not entirely sorry to see me go home.

I was exposed to the virus and was promptly tested. Negative. Repeated the test a couple days later. Again, negative. Then the next day I started to feel ill. This time, the test was positive, and because of a couple of issues, my doctor decided to admit me to the Mayo Clinic Hospital in Scottsdale, Ariz.

I am not a patient patient. Understand, in a COVID-19 unit, there are no visitors. There is no walking the halls for a change of scenery. There is no business as usual, which for me, is torture. It's surreal, and, at times, frightening.

But this is not a story about being sick; this is about how the hospital and health care providers and staff adjusted to accommodate patients. They truly are health care heroes.

From my business perspective, they are also champions of customer service, being resourceful for clients/customers (patients) in the face of extreme circumstances. Teamwork is evident everywhere.

More than 30 nurses cared for this challenging patient, and every one was kind, caring and gracious. They all had to change clothes every time they entered a different room – hospital garb, gloves, masks and face shields. If they go outside your room and come back a minute later, they have to change again. Therefore, they don't come to your room unless you really need something.

The door to the room is never opened for more than a couple of seconds. They don't want air to get out in the hallway. You can't poke your head out the door to ask a question. There was a computer screen in front of my bed where I was monitored every second. Most communication is through that monitor, at the touch of a button.

And no matter how pesky I got; the rules were there for my protection. Let me give you an example. My doctor was in to see me, and when he left, he said he had to see a patient next door. As soon as he left, I thought of something else and wrote a note and asked the nurse to give it to him. The nurse kindly explained that you couldn't even take a piece of paper out of the room.

I was fortunate also to have the ear of my daughter-in-law's brother, Aaron Stern, a doctor at Elmhurst Hospital in the New York City borough of Queens. He's been helping coronavirus patients for nine months and shared information on treatment options and provided explanations on the course of the disease.

It's fair to say I am not used to being away from my office and limited in my activity. I was so eager to get back to work, and business was waiting. I didn't have time to be sick. But this amazing group of people took my attitude in stride.

I've always had tremendous respect for those in the medical profession, who aren't afraid to treat people with horrible conditions without concern for their own well-being. This pandemic has tested all of us, but the doctors, nurses and health care workers have had a challenge that few of us will ever have to face.

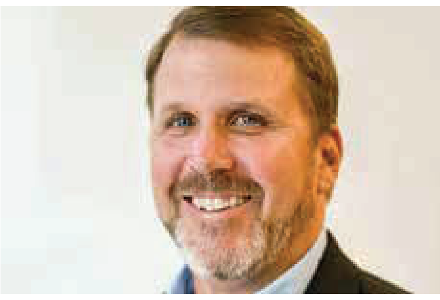
I am so grateful that we have this level of care available. I am thankful for the researchers who have made remarkable discoveries in the treatment, and soon, prevention of this disease.

My life is settling down now, and I am convalescing at home. I hope to get back to near normal in the next 30 days. The outcome could have been very different, and I realize how lucky I am.

Mackay's Moral: An attitude of gratitude does wonders for your health. ■

Teamwork is **evident everywhere.**

Harvey Mackay is the author of the New York Times bestseller "Swim With the Sharks Without Being Eaten Alive." He can be reached through his website, www.harveymackay.com.



GUEST COLUMN | ERIC CORMIER

Culture of volunteerism

WHEN IT COMES TO GIVING BACK, there is no time like the present. April is National Volunteer Month, a timely justification for Rhode Island employers to make an impact in the local community. Employee volunteer programs are proven to drive team building and foster collaboration, both facets of the workplace essential to reinforcing company culture. Businesses of all sizes can adopt successful employee volunteer programs. However, organizing corporate volunteering presents challenges in the current climate. Fortunately, online and outdoor activities are great opportunities to make a difference while keeping employees safe.

Go online or get outside. Business owners should first consider the type of volunteer activities that are viable for their team. If employees are comfortable gathering outdoors, environmental cleanups organized to commemorate Earth Day on April 22 are an option. Cleaning up a neighborhood park or teaming with the local government for a tree planting can make a difference. It is also important to explore volunteer options for employees who may not be able to gather outdoors. In this scenario, employers can participate in online tutoring programs for kids or host a virtual food drive for families in need.

Align volunteer programs with company values. Rhode Island employers who plan immediate or long-term volunteer programs should consider focusing on causes that align with company values. Workplace culture is directly impacted by corporate values, especially as younger generations prioritize employers' social impacts. For example, technology companies sometimes lend their expertise to teach coding skills or help nonprofit organizations struggling with the digital transformation. Business leaders should look beyond initial ideas to contemplate how the social impacts of volunteer efforts map back to their core mission and values.

Offer paid volunteer time off. Another option for business owners to consider is expanding employee benefits to include paid volunteer time off, or VTO. Employees with paid volunteer time off may be more likely to participate in charitable efforts, whether with the organization or individually. The process of reporting VTO also helps capture data that can offer valuable insights and trends surrounding the organization's social impact.

Lead by example. It is essential that management lead by example. Building culture through corporate volunteering starts at the top. Company leadership should be active and visible as employees roll up their sleeves to do good. When leadership takes part in volunteer programs, the relaxed atmosphere can help them be more accessible while breaking down barriers between management and staff.

Executive participation lends credibility to corporate volunteering efforts. Employers also should consider establishing a volunteer council to spread internal awareness of volunteer opportunities. It is vital that senior leadership be counted among the council members.

Recognize individual employees. It is common for successful corporate volunteering programs to recognize employees. Individual workers who go above and beyond are the foundation of most volunteer programs. Such recognition can reinforce participation and motivate other employees to become more involved.

The economic recovery may already be underway, but there are still many people in need because of the pandemic. National Volunteer Month and Earth Day are immediate options for organized volunteer programs. Rhode Island business leaders should keep a charitable mindset year-round as the local community recovers. After all, every day is a good day to do good. ■

Building culture through corporate volunteering **starts at the top.**

Eric Cormier is a manager of human resources services in Rhode Island for Texas-based Insperity Inc., which provides human resources and administrative services.

GUEST COLUMN | JOHN GRAHAM

There's no going back now

IT'S BEEN MORE THAN A YEAR now since we've been living life in the COVID-19 pandemic. The end is uncertain and the implications for the future are far from clear.

McKinsey reports that 75% of U.S. employees and close to a third in the Asia–Pacific region report symptoms of burnout. European nations are reporting increasing levels of pandemic fatigue. The number of those who rate their mental health as "very poor" is more than three times higher than before the crisis. Such figures should get our attention, but do they?

Perhaps the most dangerous part of the coronavirus is its divisiveness. Many times, a crisis brings us together to slay the dragon. But the pandemic has driven us apart. Who would have thought life could take such a painful turn?

Overnight, workers were told to work from home. Not only did they do it, they liked it. Now many are ready to refuse to go back. To express their pleasure of working from home, they remodeled their bedrooms, kitchens and basements, purchased all sorts of digital devices and office equipment and didn't miss a beat.

They're choosey, too. "You want me in the office? I don't think so." Some moved to the middle of nowhere. They donned their sweats, popped open a laptop, jumped on virtual meetings and went to work in their new $999 office chair or decided to stay in bed and make it their office that day. To the utter surprise to everyone, productivity went up.

That's just the first chapter. McKinsey also notes, "There is a veritable flood of new small businesses. In the third quarter of 2020 alone, there were more than 1.5 million new-business applications in the U.S. – almost double the figure for the same period in 2019." That's not all. Apple Inc. reported its highest revenue in its history in the fourth quarter, and the company wasn't alone.

All this adds up to an amazing, yet counterintuitive, story. But what does it mean to all of us who must live it? What in the world is going on? Even more to the point, what's the message about the future? Here are four thoughts:

The genie is out of the bottle. Like no other phenomenon in modern history, the pandemic released a level of momentum sufficient to turn the world upside down. It may also be the catalyst that changes everything, from politics, public policy, health and medicine, education, work-life balance, business, entertainment, culture, industry, science and government.

Far more people have seats at the table. We talked for so long, but nothing changed. Then suddenly, we became keenly aware of those who had long been invisible to us. We raised our hands and called them "heroes" but never raised their wages. We've finally figured out that when everyone has a seat, we have better health care, better jobs, stronger families and happier communities. Could it possibly be that it took a painful pandemic to make more room at the table?

Everything is under a microscope. Counterintuitive but true, the number of applications for fall 2021 at the University of California are breaking all records. It's happening at the same moment when millions of young Americans are questioning the value of a college education. Those who went before them, the millennials, are dogged in determining their own way in the world. Don't be surprised. The lens of the microscope may never rest.

Don't drink the Kool-Aid. There are dangers in tension-filled, stressful times. Someone has aptly described it as "hitting the pandemic wall." That's when we reach out for relief, trying to get our lives on a better path. Simple, quick and easy answers are what sell in turbulent times – "Buy this or do that and your problems vanish and your dreams come true." We're too resilient to let us do that to ourselves. ■

John Graham of GrahamComm is a marketing and sales-strategy consultant and business writer. Contact him at jgraham@grahamcomm.com.

MARKETPLACE

OPINION

EDITORIALS

Proposed PPP tax ignores ongoing pandemic threat

MIXED SIGNALS: Gov. Daniel J. McKee has earned a reputation as an advocate for small businesses but has angered many of them with a budget proposal to tax Paycheck Protection Program loans over $150,000. The plan would generate about $67.7 million in general revenue over two fiscal years.
AP PHOTO/STEVEN SENNE

Rhode Island's leading small-business advocate as lieutenant governor has sent mixed signals to that constituency since taking over as governor last month.

On April 12, Gov. Daniel J. McKee unveiled a $20 million grant program for small businesses, using 2020 funding from federal pandemic relief. Programs that directly target the state's most struggling small businesses are desperately needed.

But what should equally concern state leaders is the long-term survival of thousands of other still-endangered businesses. Just because they are a little bigger than the state's most vulnerable businesses targeted by the new program or are not in imminent danger of closing doesn't mean their survival is assured.

It's that group that seems detached from another proposal McKee recently submitted to the General Assembly.

Gov. McKee wants to tax forgiven Paycheck Protection Program loans greater than $150,000, to generate $67.7 million for the state over two fiscal years.

The governor's office says he wants to be fair to those that have managed without a PPP loan because businesses that had loans forgiven can afford the proposed tax.

First, pitting businesses against each other to help justify a budget proposal is unseemly for a self-described pro-business governor.

And while some businesses could afford the tax, for others it will be just one more unexpected financial burden. Lawmakers need to remind the governor the latter is something the state has no business creating for employers amid a pandemic-induced recession that isn't done claiming victims. ■

Develop a vision for ARP aid

The state is expecting $1.1 billion in new federal pandemic relief, just over a year after receiving – and finally spending – $1.25 billion. How should state leaders spend American Rescue Plan funding?

Slowly, with an eye toward long-term challenges such as affordable housing, urges the Rhode Island Foundation. The nonprofit and partners will solicit ideas from the community over the next few months and develop recommendations.

The initiative bears watching because the foundation's director, Neil D. Steinberg, has already gotten early buy-in from Gov. Daniel J. McKee and his fellow Democratic leaders in the General Assembly.

As the often-heated public debate over the first round of federal aid showed, there will be no shortage of legitimate needs – or interest groups advocating for them.

But an important difference this time around is the longer time period to spend the money, until 2024.

State leaders should not miss the chance to target intractable issues with some of that money.

Got a potentially big idea? Let the steering committee know at arpideas@rifoundation.org. ■

POLL CENTRAL

EXECUTIVE POLL

Back to the workplace?

Is your company planning to have most or all of its employees return to the workplace this year?

- Yes: 60%
- No: 20%
- Unsure: 20%

Will you let employees return to the workplace if they have not been vaccinated?

- Yes: 60%
- No: 20%
- Unsure: 20%

How much of your workforce do you expect to return to the office or other workplace by the end of 2021?

- All employees: 60%
- About 75% of employees: 20%
- About half the employees: 20%
- About 25% of employees: 0%
- Our company is staying fully remote: 0%

Has workplace productivity been negatively impacted by some employees working from home?

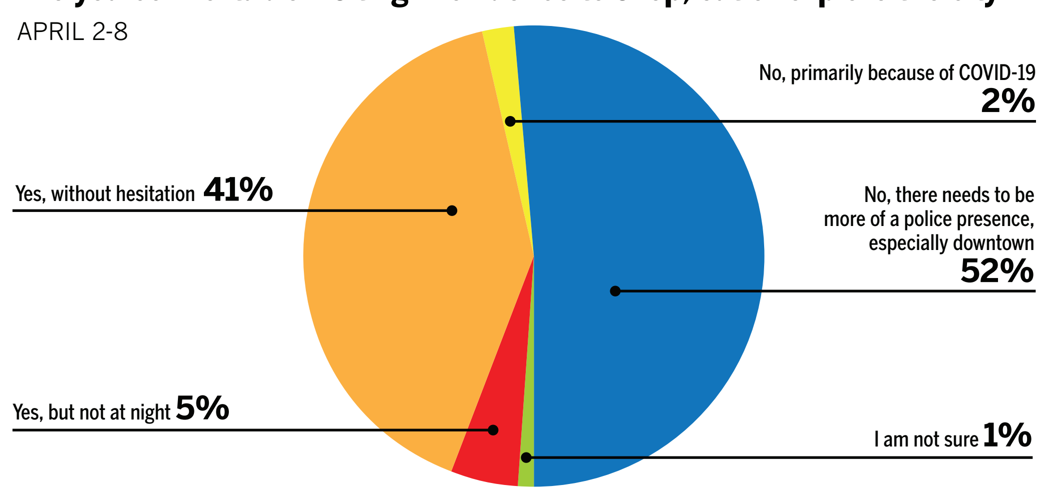
- No, it was not negatively impacted: 60%
- Yes, it was somewhat impacted negatively: 40%
- Yes, it was greatly impacted negatively: 0%
- Unsure: 0%

The Providence Business News Executive Poll is a weekly survey of 70 business leaders throughout the state, representing small and large companies in a variety of industries.

PBN.COM POLL

Are you comfortable visiting Providence to shop, eat or explore the city?

APRIL 2-8



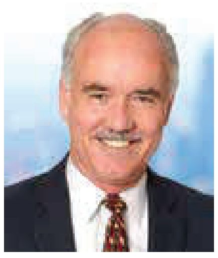
THIS WEEK'S POLL: **Should Providence create a new public-safety office for initial responses to nonemergency calls to the police and fire departments?**

- Yes, police in particular are stretched too thin in the city
- Yes, because that could allow for a reduction in spending in both departments
- No, police need better training to respond to nonemergency situations
- No, we need more police and firefighters, not less
- I'm not sure

To vote, go to PBN.com and follow the link on the home page

OPINION

R.I. can't afford a charter school freeze



LAURIE WHITE AND CHRISTOPHER D. GRAHAM
GUEST COLUMN

Improving our K-12 public schools to a level approaching and hopefully surpassing those of Massachusetts and other states consistently recognized for educational excellence is one of the most effective tools our state has to build economic prosperity for all Rhode Islanders.

To create more opportunities and higher-wage jobs for more people, Rhode Island schools must provide our children with a better chance to reach their full academic potential. We must stay the course on reforms recently enacted by the General Assembly and being implemented by Education Commissioner Angélica Infante-Green and her team at the **R.I. Department of Education** – in the city of Providence and throughout the entire state.

Commissioner Infante-Green is committed to ensuring that every school is a place that can nurture the dreams of our young people, deliver on high standards and foster high achievers, not only in the classroom but in life. She relentlessly pursues a vision for our schools in which students come first. The **Greater Providence Chamber of Commerce** has great confidence in the commissioner, and believes she deserves the support of Rhode Island's business community and other partners willing to contribute to the strides we have already made despite what everyone would acknowledge has been a period of unthinkable challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Among the additional headwinds the commissioner faces, is proposed legislation in the General Assembly to halt the expansion of public charter schools in the state for three years. The reality is that by their very nature, not all charter schools will be successful. Our elected officials have a duty and responsibility to ask hard questions about what the data reveals as to performance, whether charter schools outperform traditional public schools, which methods used by charter schools are working and which are not.

But there is no reason to halt charter growth for three years while these questions are studied and considered. We need to continue to act boldly. We cannot wait. Our students cannot wait. Those three years are critical to the intellectual, physical, social and emotional development of the many children who would benefit from all the exceptional work being done in our public charter schools.

The Chamber agrees with local parents and community advocates when they say that far too many children are stuck in inadequate schools and thousands are relegated to waiting lists for entry into high-quality charters. We echo their call that now is not the time to put a moratorium on charter schools or the aspirations of families of kids who will be our state's future. It is unjust to ask those families to wait any longer for us to fix what is ailing Rhode Island's education system.

Limiting the school choice options parents desperately need is not going to help the next generation of Rhode Island citizens and workers. A freeze on public charter school development will leave our children further behind and take away opportunities from the very people who need and deserve them the most. ■

Laurie White is president of the Greater Providence Chamber of Commerce. Christopher D. Graham is office managing partner at Locke Lord LLP in Providence and chairman of the Education Council of the Chamber.

Limiting the school choice options … **is not going to help** the next generation.

Rise in Treasury yields is a warning to White House

THOMAS TZITZOURIS
GUEST COLUMN

President Joe Biden will likely face an economic headwind that no president has faced since Bill Clinton in his first term – rising interest rates as he seeks to set his economic agenda.

The first quarter of 2021 witnessed a meteoric rise in borrowing costs for both the U.S. public and private sectors, with 10-year Treasury yields jumping from around 0.90% to start the year, to about 1.75% to end March. There are very profound questions about what this rise in interest rates means for investors, the housing market, governments, and companies too, but more important questions are "Why did rates rise so quickly?" and "What is it telling us about the next few years?"

On the first question, it's no surprise that rates increased between December and March – interest rates have been rising steadily since August, as the U.S. economy began to rapidly pull itself out of recession. This is the typical pattern witnessed in the early part of nearly every economic cycle, though the first years of the last decade witnessed the opposite: falling yields, as the recovery was fragile and delayed by poorly timed regulations and tax increases. Still, yields eventually rose by the second half of the last decade once growth accelerated. So, this type of increase in yields is pretty typical. But the acceleration since December is an old but very clear message from the bond market to elected officials in Washington. That message is that the bond market will always have the final say on the magnitude and purpose of government spending. That is to say that borrowing comes at a cost, and when growth is scarce, like it was in the 2010s, the bond market has little incentive to penalize borrowers that continue to pile on debt. But when growth is ample, and better lending opportunities exist, each new dollar of borrowing requires a higher interest rate than prior rounds of indebtedness. In other words, the bond market is still sovereign over the sovereign when it comes to the nation's checkbook.

This is an important observation that has derailed Republican and Democratic agendas over the years. And for the first time in about 25 years, the bond market has awoken from its slumber to challenge the economic agenda of our commander in chief. If President Biden responds the way prior presidents have, he's likely to whittle down the scope of his economic agenda, so as to avoid collateral damage to the economy, particularly the housing sector, which is finally standing on its own two feet after a dozen years of false starts. But if President Biden chooses to push aside the warnings from the bond market – or even worse, use new regulatory policies to suppress the signal from the market – then the bond market will likely push back, and that's when households and investors risk becoming collateral damage. We make no forecast on the eventual outcome, and for now we note that the bond market has settled down some since the end of March – an unusual level of patience for a market that's known to be far more temperamental than the stock market. But if the Biden administration pushes forward with additional stimulus later in the year, it's likely to trigger another tantrum in the bond market, and the next one may result in both economic and financial market casualties if neither side chooses to back down. ■

Thomas Tzitzouris is director at New York City-based Strategas Research Partners. He lives in Rhode Island.

The bond market will always **have the final say** on … government spending.

ONE LAST THING

PBN PHOTO/MICHAEL SALERNO

Stay true to core values

Jack Martin

Providence Public Library executive director

Following 11 years at the New York Public Library, Jack Martin took over as PPL executive director in January 2014. He was the driving force behind a recently completed $26 million renovation.

ON March 16, 2020, Providence Public Library's administrative team gathered in person for the last time in more than a year to brainstorm how to carry on the library's mission during what we now know is a global health crisis of unprecedented scale. The decision? Outfit staff with everything needed to work from home so PPL could go completely virtual until it was safe to gather in person again.

One of PPL's greatest strengths is the creativity of our staff and their willingness to collaborate, stay flexible, innovate and quickly adapt to change. Creating a work environment where this is possible was key to PPL's growth before the pandemic and proved absolutely essential during it.

What have we learned?

Be responsive, not reactive, to change: Taking a proactive approach – and actively listening to and co-creating with our community – has allowed PPL to reach, support and enrich more Rhode Islanders than ever during the pandemic.

Embrace technology: Because of our teams' expertise and willingness to experiment – and yes, play! – with technology, PPL operations never came to a halt. In fact, they have increased over the past 12 months.

Be authentic: PPL has not wavered from our core values, one of which is agency. Empowering staff to bring their full selves to work, creating space for vulnerability and self-care, and encouraging risk-taking and out-of-the-box solutions have enabled our team to remain resilient – and ultimately, highly effective. ■

PBN PROVIDENCE BUSINESS NEWS
MANUFACTURING
2021 AWARDS

CONGRATULATIONS to our 2021 Manufacturing Award Winners

Visit PBN.com to view the event video and special report.

Bill Prichett, founder of Lumetta, accepts their award.

Karen Murphy, GCDF, career coordinator, and Susan Votto, supervisor of career and technical education, William M. Davies Jr. Career & Technical High School.

Sarge graciously accepts the award on behalf of Amgen.

Gregg Scarlata, president and chief operating officer of Colonial Mills, with Ana Maria Garcia.

The team from Avtech proudly displays their award.