

You Don't Need *an* Empire to Build Strength *for* Change

by Deborah Linnell

Sharing work and
resources has led to
joint funding of some
nonprofits' efforts.

IT IS MORE THAN A TRUISM THAT THE WHOLE IS greater than the sum of its parts. Nonprofit organizations that have pooled resources have seen the strength of this principle in action.

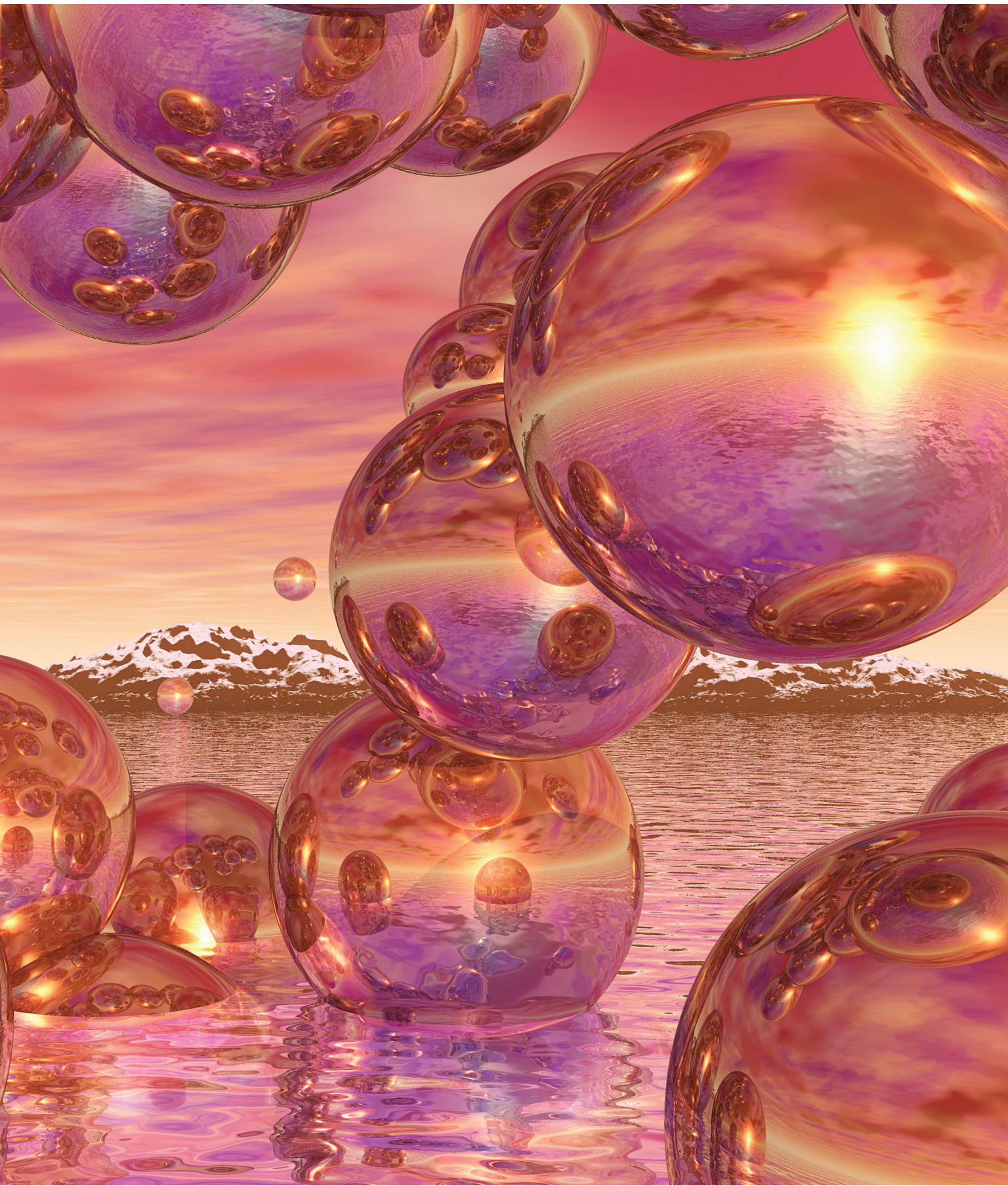
Recently, four Rhode Island organizations that work in affordable housing have found ways to share staff as well as office space and to co-plan their legislative, communications, and fund-development strategies. Sharing this work has led to joint funding of their efforts and a major legislative campaign victory. The four groups that comprise this coalition are the Corporation for Supportive Housing (CSH), a national organization that promotes permanent supportive housing; the Rhode Island Coalition for the Homeless (RICH); the Housing Action Coalition of Rhode Island, the state's affordable-housing advocacy group; and the Housing Network, the association for Rhode Island's community-development corporations.

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Sharing Staff, Forging Relationships

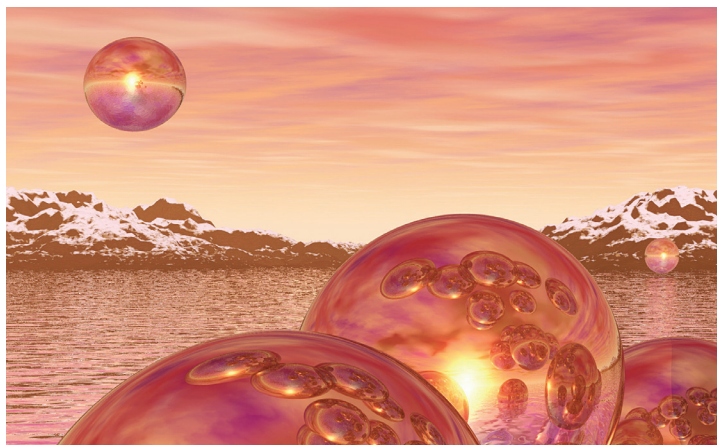
Earlier in the decade, staff and board at the Rhode Island Coalition for the Homeless became interested in the supportive-housing model, which places the chronically homeless in permanent supportive housing rather than in shelters. RICH invited the Corporation for Supportive Housing to open an office. When the new Rhode Island director, Michelle Brophy, began her position, she was given a budget for an office and staff. Rather than build a mini-empire by hiring her own staff, Brophy used funds to "buy time" of staff in other organizations to support needed functions. Her theory was that she would build strong bonds with groups on which she would soon rely to make the CSH model a reality. Brophy also subleased a simple office space from the Rhode Island Coalition for the Homeless, further cementing her close working relationship with the organization.

Both RICH and CSH understood that the capacity to strategically communicate to shelter providers, policy makers, funders, and the general



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public was essential to create the groundwork for early adopters and, later, overall adaptation to the supportive housing model. With permission from the national office, Brophy used her funding to help RICH pay for a new board-approved position for a seasoned nonprofit professional who has a background in strategic communications, advocacy, and legislative campaigns. RICH got an experienced associate director, and CSH got a hire who could build its communications strategy: a win-win for both groups.



Communications alone cannot change systems, however. CHS and RICH needed a strong advocacy push for supportive housing. RICH and CSH could have individually or jointly hired their own policy director. But they turned to Brenda Clement, the executive director of the Housing Action Coalition, the state's affordable-housing coalition, and wrote a joint proposal to the United Way to formalize Clement's role in leading the legislative advocacy work for supportive housing.

Immediately, Clement and RICH's associate director noticed that the same people attended both organizations' advocacy meetings. The two groups joined forces to prevent this duplication of effort and created an advocacy-action committee that attends to the advocacy affordable-housing advocacy agenda, including the needs of the homeless. Board members for both organizations are also community stakeholders who sit on these committees and, as a result, were relieved by the reduction in the number of meetings. In fact, some board members overlap in these organizations and they speak about formalizing

board member roles to ensure that the practice of permeating organization boundaries becomes institutionalized.

Another outcome of sharing work is that the Housing Network, the Housing Action Coalition, CSH, and RICH all examined how their staff was deployed to various state, federal, local community, constituent, and other standing committees or meetings. They stopped duplicating representation unless absolutely necessary and now depend on one another to communicate the essence of the committees or meetings to one another.

But pooling resources—sharing staff and work-space, designating organizational representatives to attend common meetings, and so on—takes enormous trust among partners. It requires that leadership cares more about community impact than about institution building.

In sum, this is a new approach for organizational capacity and for capacity building writ large. Having a shared issue to focus on—in this case, bringing supportive housing as a model to Rhode Island—created an eyes-on-the-prize focus on the end result among the groups. This ideal of shared work for common cause was prescient as well; even before the economic downturn, these nonprofits laid the groundwork for these efforts. Despite doing this work before the economic crisis, the efforts to create shared work and shared space described below helped these small organizations—all with budgets of less than \$700,000—survive the downturn.

Colocation and Shared Back Office

As the four groups created an alliance of shared resources to bring supportive housing to the state, they began to discuss colocation. They divided work according to their strengths.

The Housing Action Coalition of Rhode Island and Housing Network did the front-end legwork of identifying potential properties to lease. The Housing Action Coalition dealt with the negotiations for the lease and buildout because its director is also an attorney.

A coalition of community-development corporations, Housing Network had access to architects and builders within its network and took on the work of the office buildout. RICH did the

primary fundraising and budgeting; it has the majority of funds and distributes these monies to other groups. The result is a beautiful buildout in an old mill building in Pawtucket, just over the Providence border. It has open space; indeed it is basically wall-less—except for a handful of individual offices—which allows for easy access and work among these organizations.

Efficiencies continue. All four organizations share reception and administrative support tasks. The Housing Network manages the office, equipment leases, and supplies, and its bookkeeping staff handles bookkeeping for all groups but one. Housing Action Coalition holds the new AmeriCorps VISTA program—but the volunteers are split among all groups. To pay for its share of the receptions, RICH bartered a staff member, who does Web-related work for the Housing Network. In addition, the groups together applied to AmeriCorps and received 10-plus volunteers whose time is split among the organizations but that is managed by a single Housing Action Coalition staff person.

How Did It Happen?

These four organizations' collaboration was not funder driven. But all the key actors had previous working relationships with one another and could build on those prior experiences. Some other commonalities also create success for shared-work models:

Trust and relationships are key. If you do not have them, it is critically important to take the time to build relationships before entering into shared staff or colocation agreements.

Shared vision. Having shared values and vision—even if it concerns only one strategy—is enough for groups to find common ground and work together. But this vision must be shared, and groups must be engaged as equals for collaboration and shared work to succeed. While each of these groups has a distinct mission within the affordable-housing world, together they saw the value in the one issue of supportive housing.

Ego is left at the door. Collaboration requires leadership that focuses on working together, facilitative and adaptive leadership skills, and leaders whose egos do not have to be “fed.” In

shared-work models, those who drive these efforts cannot be controlling, and they must share and delegate.

Members of leadership at these four Rhode Island-based organizations are all capable mid- to late-career professionals who can share the best of themselves and their organizations. Each leads but also follows when someone with more expertise is required for the task. This enables leaders to honestly and quickly assess which group should take the lead on which aspects of shared programmatic or administrative work. These organizations also have several younger staff members who see shared work and distributed leadership as a “normal” work environment.

Community Results

Many community results have flowed from these organizations' decision to join forces. But a key outcome occurred this spring, when the groups joined together to “defend” the Neighborhood Opportunities Program (NOP), a state housing subsidy that works for affordable rent for low- and no-income people. In the economic downturn, Rhode Island is one of the hardest-hit states and, over the past three years, has some of the highest unemployment figures and foreclosures among all U.S. states. After state income declined, the state legislature cut all people-serving programs—housing, health, welfare, education—dramatically. Every year, NOP is zeroed out of the budget or dramatically reduced.

But despite these dramatic reductions in community-serving organizations and services, this past spring, NOP was one of only three programs to receive increased funding. Today, staff members at all four organizations cite the ability to work, plan, and seamlessly implement activities that creates broader impact on the affordable-housing issue than any one group could achieve alone. They do not believe that such a victory would have been possible without a joint effort to break down organizational boundaries and become wall-less from the top down.

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