



## Town of North Kingstown, Rhode Island

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### PRESS RELEASE

#### North Kingstown Youth Commission Celebrates Successful Inaugural Year



*Members of the Inaugural 2023/24 North Kingstown Youth Commission are joined by the group's coordinator, Kayla Van Gorden (center, back row), for the unveiling of a Buddy Bench at the Wilson Park on 12/10/24. (Photo credit NK Rec Dept)*

On December 10<sup>th</sup>, North Kingstown Youth Commission members invited members of the North Kingstown community to join them alongside **A. Ralph Mollis**, Town Manager, **Chelsey Dumas-Gibbs**, Director of the Recreation Department, and members of Governor McKee's LEARN365RI oversight team including **Emily Ustach**, RIDE Expanded Learning Opportunity Specialist and **Jeremy Chiapetta**, Senior Advisor to the Governor, and North Kingstown Town Councilors **Kim Page**, **Matt McCoy**, **Beth Hill-Ross**, and **Linnea Drew** to unveil the installation of a Buddy Bench at the Zeke Harris Memorial Playground at North Kingstown's Wilson Park.

With direction from Youth Commission Coordinator **Kayla Van Gorden**, a Quidnessett Elementary School teacher, middle school students from both Davisville and Wickford Middle Schools applied in December 2023 to be accepted to the inaugural class of the North Kingstown Youth Commission in the 2023/24 academic year. The program is funded through the Town of North Kingstown's LEARN365RI grant (and is being continued in the 2024-26 academic years with LEARN365RI round 2 funding) and allows up to seven participating students to earn a modest award for their work in the group. In 2023/24, students met several times each quarter to design presentations to the North Kingstown Town Council for the ways in which they proposed to spend allotted funding, with a mission to improve lives of school-aged children involved in programming with the Department of Recreation and in the North Kingstown School Department. Students' proposals to create hygiene kits for community distribution to disadvantaged students or

youth in need, and the installation of six (6) Buddy Benches at public recreation areas in the Town of North Kingstown were both unanimously approved.

Youth Commission students researched and reported that students in the U.S. show that approximately 80% of children experience loneliness at school and 68% admit to having been bullied. To combat these sentiments and experiences, the North Kingstown Youth Commission proposed furthering a nationwide initiative known as Buddy Benches in their own community, allowing children an obvious physical mechanism to recognize a peer in need of support or a friend; the child would then either be joined on the bench or invited to leave the bench to play.

“The students’ foresight to encourage belonging and unity in such a practical and lasting way is applauded by our entire North Kingstown community,” says **A. Ralph Mollis**, Town Manager. Similarly, following the ceremony, Director of the Recreation Department, **Chelsey-Dumas-Gibbs** said, “Seeing members of our Youth Commission publicly recognized, at Council meetings and at this latest Buddy Bench Unveiling where they each received Certificates of Special Recognition from Governor McKee, is rewarding and well deserved. These students are role models for their peers and the recognition of their dedication to the group and their mission is commendable.”

Applications are currently being accepted for North Kingstown middle school students interested in being on the 2024/25 North Kingstown Youth Commission, which will be formed this month. To apply, see the Town of North Kingstown’s LEARN365RI webpage: <https://www.northkingstownri.gov/989/The-North-Kingstown-Middle-School-Youth-> to complete this Google Form: <https://bit.ly/nkyouthcommission>.

*For more information on the North Kingstown Recreation Department and/or the North Kingstown Middle School Youth Commission, please contact Chelsey Dumas-Gibbs ([cdumas@northkingstownri.gov](mailto:cdumas@northkingstownri.gov)). For more information on this Press Release or the Town of North Kingstown, please contact Kate Glass, Director of Communications and Executive Assistant in the Office of the Town Manager ([kglass@northkingstownri.gov](mailto:kglass@northkingstownri.gov)).*

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