

State cultural grant providing the next act for VACT

Community theater organization awarded nearly \$53,000

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Verona Area Community Theater has been provided support to pull-through the pandemic – to the tune of nearly \$53,000.

VACT is one of 385 beneficiaries of grant funds from the state, after Gov. Tony Evers earmarked aid from the federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act to assist cultural organizations statewide whose operations have been negatively affected by COVID-19.

Totaling \$15 million, the grants were given to organizations that have a primary mission to produce, present, or exhibit cultural disciplines such as music, dance, theater, literature and the

visual arts, according to a news release. Awards were also available to organizations focused on items of environmental or scientific interest.

Organizations were allowed to ask for up to \$250,000 and Verona's community theater group received close to what it had asked for, netting \$52,827.

"Music, visual art, live performances, and other cultural organizations have always been a place of healing and hope for Wisconsinites, especially during difficult times," an announcement for the grant stated. "However the COVID-19 pandemic has hit these institutions hard, and our state risks losing them when we need them most."

Distributed by the state Department of Administration, the COVID-19 Cultural Organizations grants can be used to cover pandemic-related impacts such as lost revenue, increased



File by Kimberly Wethal

From left, Stan (Curt Hanke) and Bev (Liz Nickels) imagine the face of their exes, who are getting married next weekend, after they discover the two ran off to Las Vegas to married before them during Verona Area Community Theater's production of "Four Weddings and an Elvis" on Feb. 15, 2019.

workers' compensation costs, cleaning and sanitization and purchases of services or equipment to facilitate telework by employees.

"Just like small businesses, cultural organizations have taken a major financial hit," DOA secretary Joel Brennan wrote in a news release. "We're all in this

together. We hope that these funds will make it possible for us to be able to enjoy the museums, theaters, and music from these organizations once it is safe to do so again."

The cultural grant provides for a sector of business that was overlooked by a lot of other pandemic

stimulus options, VACT board member Lynn Vilker said.

VACT makes its money through ticket sales, Vilker said. While VACT is volunteer-run and there are no salaries to be paid, its theater building on Lincoln Street requires upkeep and mortgage payments.

Performances of "Pajama Party," "Seussical Kids," "Getting to Know: Footloose" and "Chicago: High School Edition," were just a few weeks away from taking to the stage when the state's Safer at Home started in late March. The theater also canceled "Music Man Sr.," its first ever show with a cast entirely of older members.

"The arts are the thing that people turned to during this crisis but it's one of the things that's been hit hardest," Vilker said. "We want to make sure we survive – which we will – we have a really great community."

As the theater

organization looks ahead to 2021, the end of the pandemic remains unclear, but Vilker said it will require new tech to be purchased and software to be licensed for mixing audio and streaming video.

Performances typically require performers to be within six feet of each other on a stage, or singing and playing instruments, which means having to completely redesign programs going forward.

While the state cultural grant only provided for 25% of organizations' incomes, Vilker said that portion is still enough to innovate and offer programs in the spring.

"Being able to continually innovate in the arts in a time like we are in can be difficult because innovation takes an investment," Vilker said. "By getting this grant, we can do the innovation we want to meet the needs of this time and be there as a resource to the community."

Sugar River UMC provides 70 VASD families winter outerwear

Sugar River UMC held winter gear collection drive in October

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This winter should be a little warmer – and if the snow comes, drier – for over 70 Verona Area School District families.

That's thanks to a winter gear drive the Sugar River United Methodist Church held throughout October.

The church held contactless drop-off days on Tuesdays and Thursdays throughout the month, asking community members to donate new or gently-used boots, winter jackets, snow pants, hats and waterproof gloves/mittens.

The items were collected for VASD students in Pre-K through 12th grade, who were identified by school social workers as being the most vulnerable. The church then turned its fellowship hall into a "processing center" where all of the donations were looked over and if anything needed to be washed, there was a washer and dryer on site.

Volunteers sorted out the donations by size, topping tables and lining the walls until the entire fellowship hall was filled.

School district social worker Trista Kaja worked with the over 70 families who requested winter gear to create 'orders' of the items needed.

Volunteers used plastic bags to fill with the items from the family's wish lists, and Sugar River UMC's serve director Erin Wilson told them to pick out the same items they'd want for their own children, which includes intentionally matching colors and putting together



Photo submitted

Tables lined with clothes for the winter gear drive held at Sugar River United Methodist Church.

outfits.

Some families only asked for items for a child or two, others made requests for the whole family.

"We're delighted we were able to largely accommodate everyone's request," Wilson

said.

She said in some cases such as where the boot or pant size asked for was not available for a child of a specific gender, they'd offer one size up if they could.

"It was a bit of scavenger

hunt to find the right sizes more than typical even though we were organized," Wilson said.

Only "one family or social pod at a time" was allowed to volunteer. Wilson pre-recorded a training video and also provided training by phone call ahead of time, rather than providing her usual in-person orientations.

As the sign-up deadline for families approached, there were 35 families registered and the social workers said they expected around 10 more; however, over 70 families signed-up by the cutoff. The number of families asking for assistance

meant Wilson needed "all hands on deck" and she said overall 20 people volunteered with this project.

Wilson said that social workers used school vans for hauling the plastic bags to a pick-up day for families held at Redeemer City Church in Fitchburg.

The leftover items were kept out in the fellowship hall last week so that families could ask social workers for exchanges. This week, remaining items were bagged by volunteers and stored in the church's Community Closet – which district social workers have 24/7 access to by key and can check the stock of

through an online inventory before coming over to the church.

Wilson also said there was a "big giant" table of gear that had been donated that wasn't specifically for winter such as rain jackets and fleece sweaters, which while she said are helpful items for families, the church doesn't have the space for nor the school the social worker capacity to get those items to families. Those items will be donated to the St. Vincent de Paul thrift store.

"There was a greater need for winter gear this year due to COVID monetary challenges," Wilson said.

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