

As pandemic fades, Upper Valley nonprofit groups adapt to changed landscape



After having a snack, brothers Damon Wright, 11, and Connor Wright, 7, of Hanover, N.H., start working on their financial literacy program in the Aspire after-school program through the Special Needs Support Center on Thursday, March 2, 2023, in Wilder, Vt. The students earn S&S Bucks that they can spend at the store the program runs. Students earn the imitation money by setting goals themselves and with teachers. (Valley News - Jennifer Hauck) Copyright Valley News. May not be reprinted or used online without permission. Send requests to permission@vnews.com. valley news photographs — Jennifer Hauck » [Buy this Image](#)

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During the COVID-19 pandemic, Laura Gillespie started to notice a change in the grant applications she completed as director of development and communications at the Upper Valley Haven: word limits.

“It’s a gift, because it frames what their expectations are and that’s come across in the reporting,” Gillespie said. “I love having that structure and the parameters set out for us.”

The small, but meaningful, change is one of ways that the COVID-19 pandemic has changed fundraising for nonprofit organizations in the Upper Valley and beyond. Organizations have re-examined how they host events, seek donations, what they ask for from municipalities, the number of grants they apply for and how to distribute funding, among other considerations.

One of the biggest changes, Gillespie and other nonprofit leaders have said, is that more foundations have started offering “unrestricted funds” — meaning grants are not tied to a specific programs.

“For us, the impact of unrestricted funding is significant,” Betsy Kohl, director of development and communication at WISE, a Lebanon-based organization that serves survivors of domestic violence. “It strengthens WISE’s ability to focus on its strategic objectives while being able to quickly respond to new opportunities and unforeseen challenges that arise.”

It’s also helped take some of the pressure off staff.

“For years and years, you would try to create something unique to apply for because grant funders were looking for something more special, to prove you have something that’s worth funding,” said Gillespie, who recently started an informal group for those who work in fundraising at nonprofits in the Upper Valley to exchange ideas. “More of them have said, ‘You know what? We’re going to offer unrestricted operating support,’ and that’s been an enormous blessing for us.”

During the first years of the pandemic, that became crucial as it allowed organizations to shift funds to where they are needed the most.

“One of the big advantages of that is for nonprofits to pivot if something happens quickly,” said Sarah Jackson, executive director of Vital Communities, a White River Junction-based nonprofit that focuses on working with community leaders to address energy, housing, transportation, climate and early childhood education, among other programs.

Grants that provide funding for several years are also helpful because it allows staff to plan programs that can have more of an impact.

“It also reduces the amount of time you have to spend generating a new proposal,” Jackson said.

Granite United Way, which provided funding to 33 Upper Valley nonprofits in 2022, is one of the organizations that changed its practices during the COVID-19 pandemic. Granite United Way awards two-year grants, and at the start of the pandemic the 2020 grants had just gone out, said Katie Berndsen, a Lebanon-based program assistant for the nonprofit organization. Those grants were originally attached to specific programs.

“However, as the pandemic wore on, we heard how nonprofits were struggling, so we reached out to the nonprofits and let them know they could transition the grants to general operating expenses,” Berndsen wrote in an email.

As the 2022 grant application process got started, Granite United Way made more changes: Organizations no longer had to present in front of the volunteers who would determine funding. Also, instead of filling out multiple grant applications for different programs, nonprofits could fill out one application for all programs — meaning they could use the money more freely.

“This allowed for one application per nonprofit and for them to use the awarded funding to fill their most urgent need,” Berndsen wrote.

Event changes

Upper Valley Haven staff were preparing for its annual Mud Ball in March 2020 when the pandemic forced them to cancel it. The annual event served as a fundraiser for the kids' programs the Haven runs and was one of four in-person events the nonprofit held each year. There also was Chefs of the Valley, where Upper Valley chefs prepared dishes in support of the Haven's food program; an August golf tournament; and the Covered Bridges Half Marathon. In 2020, all four events were canceled, leading to a loss of \$300,000 — or roughly 10% of the Haven's budget, Gillespie said.

“We were very, very worried that March and April,” she said. “We didn't know that we would be supported as generously as we ended up being. The community rallied to make up that deficit for us.”

Three years later, the Haven is only involved in one of those events: Covered Bridges. While the Haven hasn't ruled out bringing the others back, staff are still trying to figure out what that they would look like and when they would take place.

“I think, in so many ways, the pandemic was this opportunity to pause and rethink the way you do business,” Gillespie said. “I think that came true also in fundraising.”

While events are fun and can often raise a lot of money, they are quite time-consuming to plan. Haven staff began thinking more about where to put that time, and a part-time position was added to help the nonprofit pursue more donations. They also increased the number of grants they were applying for: Before COVID, it was around 20 a year, but now it's 30.

Virtual fundraising events — almost unheard of before the pandemic — became the norm, and they appear to be here to stay even as in-person events return.

At the start of the pandemic, Cortney Nichols was working for High Horses Therapeutic Riding Program in Sharon. One of the nonprofit's major fundraisers, Hoofin' It for High Horses, involved an in-person ride and walk. During the pandemic, High Horses added a virtual component to the outdoor event.

“I think we'll see more of that kind of thing. You can participate from wherever you are,” said Nichols, who is now the volunteer and development coordinator at the Special Needs Support Center in White River Junction. “Its cool because it makes events more accessible, more participation.”

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It allows for people — and potential donors — who moved away from the Upper Valley to still remain connected to organizations. After Nichols joined the Special Needs Support Center, she made virtual events a priority. People participated virtually in the Floutie 5K and also helped sponsor participants on a trip to Manchester to take part in the Disability Pride Parade.

“We really work hard to make sure we're sharing our information with as many people as possible, because you never know how somebody is going to find out about you,” Nichols said. “That's really important.”

One trend that Kohl, of WISE, noticed during the pandemic was that people took it upon themselves to come up with fundraisers. In fall 2020, for example, a community member created an event called Wicked Witches Doing Good for WISE, where participants dressed up as witches and warlocks before taking a photograph to raise money and awareness.

“We have noticed that there are more people who are creating their own fundraising opportunities to support organizations that are meaningful to them,” Kohl said. “We are not sure why exactly, but these creative fundraisers accomplish a couple of things — they are a fun way to get together while providing a shared goal in supporting a cause.”

Shifting strategies

One thing that became even more apparent during the pandemic was the need for nonprofit organizations to diversify their funding sources. While an infusion of federal funding helped provide much-needed aid for programs, that funding is beginning to phase out — if it hasn't already — even if the needs have stayed the same, or in some cases have grown.

Senior Solutions, which provides services primarily for people who live in Vermont's Windsor and Windham counties, collected more than 450 signatures for a petition article to request funding through Hartford's Town Meeting ballot for the first time.

"This could provide us with an important contribution that reflects the service we provide to residents of greater Hartford," Mark Boutwell, the Springfield, Vt.-based organization's executive director, wrote in an email.

The Public Health Council of the Upper Valley receives funding from around 20 towns in Vermont and New Hampshire totaling around \$25,000, executive director Alice Ely said. That amounts to around a quarter of the council's operating budget.

"For the most part, we have not increased our requests, even from pre-pandemic times," Ely said.

Ely applies for around five grants a year, and the board is looking at more funding sources as it looks to focus more on health disparities and health equity.

"We are looking for new sources that sort of match our needs, working with some generous partners in the region to help us get more ideas of where we can look for funding, trying to let philanthropies know a little more about us," Ely said.

The Public Health Council has also started to fund grassroots organizations that have not traditionally been part of grant funding because of certain barriers, including not being registered as a 501(c)(3) organization or having the capital some funders require.

"They can't take a grant that says, 'Well, you take the money and we're going to reimburse you,' because they don't have the cash flow to take those kinds of grants," Ely said. "Everybody has to start somewhere."

That's something Vital Communities has also started to do.

"One of the things we've been trying to do is build in sub-grants ... so that we're supporting other organizations as we put together a proposal tackling food insecurity, for example," Jackson said. "That can help especially for the organizations that don't have dedicated fundraising and development staff."

Around a year ago, Vital Communities hired a full-time development director, a position that had previously been part-time. This has helped free up fundraising responsibilities from program managers.

"It is incredibly time-consuming, and what we were realizing is it takes them away from being able to focus on those projects and implement those projects," Jackson said.

A few months ago, the Special Needs Support Center went through the process of becoming a certified child care center in Vermont. The organization started a free after-school program for children with special needs, directed at parents who have struggled to find options for their children.

"It gets us on the state's radar," Nichols said, adding that the certification could provide the organization with more funding opportunities. "We're doing this. We're providing services for kids in Vermont and you need to support that."

That leads to another important element: partnerships and advocacy. Vital Communities, for example, has increased the number of businesses and other organizations that it partners with to support housing projects.

“I think the advocacy piece is important because the nonprofits can’t raise the money that’s needed to tackle these issues alone,” Jackson said. “It really has to be a partnership between federal funding, what organizations can offer, companies and individuals.”

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