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State cultural grant providing the next act for VACT

Community theater organization awarded nearly \$53,000

NEAL PATTEN

Unified Newspaper Group

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 statewide whose operations have been negatively affected by COVID-19.

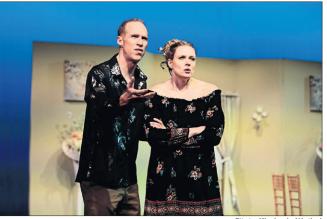
Totaling \$15 million, the grants were given to organizations that have a primary

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

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

"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 assist cultural organizations hit these institutions hard, and our state risks losing them when we need them

Distributed by the state Department of Administration, the COVID-19 Culmission to produce, present, tural Organizations grants or exhibit cultural disci- can be used to cover panplines such as music, dance, demic-related impacts such Brennan wrote in a news



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,

workers' compensation together. We hope that these 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

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 prohit," DOA secretary Joel vides for a sector of business that was overlooked really great community." theater, literature and the as lost revenue, increased release. "We're all in this by a lot of other pandemic

stimulus options, VACT organization looks ahead board member Lynn Vilker

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 we can do the innovation to make sure we survive – which we will – we have a of this time and be there as

As the theater ty."

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

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 want to meet the needs a resource to the communi-

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 collect-Pre-K through 12th grade, who were identified by school social workers as The church then turned everyone's request," Wilson 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



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

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

"We're delighted we were being the most vulnerable. able to largely accommodate

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



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assistance to families in the Verona School District.

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hunt to find the right siz-es more than typical even hands on deck" and she said before coming over to the 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.

for families approached, there were 35 families registered and the social workers 10 more; however, over 70 families signed-up by the

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 fami-As the sign-up deadline lies could ask social workers for exchanges. This week, remaining items were bagged by volunteers said they expected around and stored in the church's Community Closet – which district social workers cutoff. The number of fam- have 24/7 access to by key ilies asking for assistance and can check the stock of

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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