

Pandemic Relief

by Nicole S. Colson



New Grants to Help Micro Businesses Weather the Pandemic

A \$2,500 grant might not sound like a game-changer for businesses affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Still, it could mean the difference between reopening the doors or shutting down for good for microbusinesses.

Applications are now being accepted for the NH Community Development Finance Authority's Community Development Block Grant program for COVID Relief. The Hannah Grimes Center for Entrepreneurship in Keene received \$125,000 from the program to distribute \$2,500 federal grants to 50 businesses in Cheshire County. The organization is one of several technical assistance providers throughout the state, providing support to businesses throughout the application process.

The Community Development Block Grant program was created to fill a gap left in funding from the federal Small Business Administration's Paycheck Protection Program.

A microbusiness is defined as having five or fewer employees, including the business owner. Eligible microbusinesses must meet low- to moderate-income requirements as defined by Housing and Urban Development.

In Cheshire County, about 40% of mi-

crobusinesses meet the program's income requirements.

"It's unusual for nonprofits to be allowed to grant funds," notes Mary Ann Kristiansen, Hannah Grimes Center executive director. "In a community of our size, we are excited. It's a pretty nice chunk of money."

This round of COVID relief grant funding will be the third Hannah Grimes has distributed as well as the largest amount of money and to the largest number of businesses.

In June, the organization gave out 12 \$2,000 NH Community Development Finance Authority grants from Citizen's Bank. In July, it raised \$11,000 and distributed 10 \$1,100 "Pandemic Pivot" grants to local businesses in Cheshire County with less than \$1 million in annual revenue.

A lot of microbusinesses did not take advantage of the first round of grant funding.

"They had to have an existing banking relationship (with Citizen's Bank)," says Kristiansen.

The \$2,500 grants up for grabs now is money that can be spent on working capital and operating expenses.

"It can be spent relatively broadly, but it has to be related to the pandemic to help

them pivot (business operations) or make up for an expense that came along as a result," says Kristiansen.

There is a rolling application deadline for the program, but grant funding must be distributed by the end of 2021.

The first step would be to book an appointment via a link on the Hannah Grimes Center website and meet with program director Sara Powell. Business owners will need to provide documentation of how the funding will be used.

"We provide technical assistance to help (businesses) access money, and they are also connected to other resources we have at Hannah Grimes to help further strengthen their business," says Powell.

The Community Development Block Grant program is helping these microbusinesses make crucial decisions.

"(This money) is the difference between whether they stay in business or not," says Kristiansen. "Fifty businesses is a lot for this region. If we're thinking in the long-term, if (the grant funding) helps these businesses stay on and grow, it could have a significant impact." ■

Nicole S. Colson writes from Swanzey, New Hampshire.