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Kid program fees made flexible

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By Marin Howell

BRISTOL — In an effort to make youth programming more accessible to families in the

5-town area, the Bristol Recreation Department will be implementing a new, “pay what you can” payment system for half of its youth camps this summer. The payment option will allow families to set the camp tuition rate for themselves based on what they’re able to afford.

Taylor Welch, director of the Bristol Hub Teen Center, said the recreation department was inspired by other local organizations that have adopted a similar payment option, such as the Lake Champlain Maritime Museum in Ferrisburgh. The museum offers a pay what you can option for all of its youth camps and expeditions.

“I started talking about it with the maritime museum and I thought it was really exciting, as The Hub and the rec department want to make things in the community as accessible as possible,” Welch said. “We want everyone to feel like they are able to participate in programming. For some families \$200 for a week of camp is a lot and filling out scholarship forms can be overwhelming.”

The recreation department will offer pay what you can options for four of its camps this summer, including the department’s popular Mountain Bike Camp. Standard tuition for these week-long camps ranges from \$210 to \$250. Families will now be able to set the tuition rate for themselves and can decide how much to pay for tuition based on what they’re able to afford.

The recreation department has set a minimum tuition rate of \$25, though Welch said accommodations can be made if a family is unable to pay that amount.

“If someone approached us and said \$25 is too much, we’re flexible and we can do that,” she said.

Bristol Recreation Director Meridith McFarland said the department will use its scholarship fund to cover remaining tuition costs for individuals that use the pay what you can system.

“There have been some really generous people that have donated to the scholarship fund,” she said. “We thought that the best way we can use that fund is to apply it to covering the rest of the cost of the camper’s tuition.”

Families can also choose to pay more than the standard cost of tuition and help cover the cost of camp for another child.

“If you’re a parent that decides to pay \$500 for someone else, that money we’ll go back into the scholarship fund as that’s where we’ll be pulling it from,” McFarland explained.

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Welch said the recreation department has considered implementing a pay what you can system for a few years, though it needed to work out some details. Learning from other local organizations has helped the recreation department navigate the logistics of adopting the payment system, such as setting up a pay what you can option on the recreation department’s website.

“Talking to the maritime museum, the biggest leap was trying to figure out how to set it up on our platform. That (collaboration) gave a lot of instruction on how to structure it, and definitely gave us a lot of information as kind of a path forward,” Welch said.

The Lake Champlain Maritime Museum began offering a pay what you can option for its summer day camps and overnight expeditions in 2020.

Susan Evans McClure, executive director at the maritime museum, said the payment model has been a success.

“We’ve seen significant interest in pay-what-you-can from our community every year,” she said. “At the same time, our community and supporters and donors have really stepped up and we are seeing more donors and funders each year support camps’ tuition as well.”

McClure said the payment model aligns with the maritime museum’s mission to connect all community members to Lake Champlain, and the museum has started offering a pay what you can option for more of its programs.

“It has been a great move and resulted in many more young people getting to have a great summer experience on Lake Champlain. In fact, it’s been so successful that the museum has expanded pay-what-you-can to other youth and adult programs at the museum,” she said.

Other organizations throughout the county have also tried to implement flexible payment options for their youth programs when possible. For the past two summers, the Middlebury Community Music Center has offered all of its summer camps for free. Tuition for the music center’s camps ranges from \$255 to \$450. Last summer the music camp received a two-year, \$190,000 Afterschool and Summer Expanding Access Grant to fund tuition-free

camps, as well as to expand outreach and programming.

Sadie Brightman, executive director at the Middlebury Community Music Center, said the free camps were very popular.

“We learned that the interest was huge, and the demand was really big. We were really excited that our enrollment was completely at capacity with a significant wait list for each of our camps,” Brightman said. “It allowed us to understand that the demand was really there, and the interest was there, which has been really great information.”

In response to that success, the music center is planning to establish a sliding scale for its summer camps this year. The details of the payment system are still being refined, though Brightman said the option would resemble a pay what you can model and would give families more options when it comes to the cost of tuition. Typically, a sliding scale fee is adjusted depending on an individual’s income.

Brightman said the hope is that the new payment option helps the music center continue expanding accessibility to its youth programs.

“It was really in the context of the pandemic that we felt called to serve our community in this way, thinking of the families and the kids and the strong belief that experiences kids have in this program would be strengthening to their enrichment,” she said. “We’re just excited to continue to provide meaningful movement and music spaces for kids in the community.”

This year, the music center will use funding from the Expanding Access grant to cover the remaining cost of tuition for families that use the sliding scale. Community members will also have the option to pay more than the cost of tuition to help support other families.

Brightman said the music center will explore ways to keep the sliding scale or other flexible payment options available going forward.

“This is all so much a response to the demands and the needs in the community, we will do everything we can to keep innovating a way to move forward in the direction of this program,” she said. “That means looking for additional funding sources, keeping our ears out for what develops with this program and looking forward to working with the community to make this happen.”

The Bristol Recreation Department is also hoping to offer a pay what you can option for

its camps on an ongoing basis. Welch said the department is still figuring out what that might look like for future summers.

“We’re going to see how it goes. No matter what, next year we’ll still offer camps at this price point. We just don’t know if we can do it for four or eight or all (camps) next year,” Welch said. “This is our hope to streamline accessibility so that no matter what people’s financial situations are, they can have a fantastic summer and do fun things with other campers.”

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