

Project Name: Wren's Nest Preschool Sustainability and Housing Expansion Grant

Anticipated Project Start Date: June 2023

Anticipated Project Completion Date: July 2024

Project Location Address: Harvey Road, Bristol, Vermont

Total Projected Project Cost

Total Project Cost: \$1,480,800

Additional Funding Needed to Proceed:

We estimate needing \$1,184,640.00 in funding to complete this project after the requested \$296,160.00 in Community Recovery and Revitalization Grant funds. We are poised to conduct direct requests to larger donors, and run a donor base campaign to raise \$100,000 more matching funds. We believe the remaining funding gap can be covered by other grants, in-kind labor, and loans from the Vermont Community Loan Fund. We are confident we will be able to execute this project with the projected numbers in our proposal.

Total Amount of Bristol ARPA Funds Being Requested:

\$200,000

Project Details

The Willowell Foundation seeks funding for a multifaceted project that will grow and sustain an existing high quality preschool through the purchase of land and infrastructure; create low-income housing for professionals in early education; and help strengthen Vermont's workforce. The Wren's Nest Forest Preschool (a Willowell program) is in its eleventh year as a nature-based, four STAR, licensed preschool in Addison County. Although Wren's Nest is a well established and financially sustainable program, our history has been challenged with costly and burdensome setbacks, having moved the program twice since our inception in 2012—our most recent move being a direct impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Currently Wren's Nest Preschool runs as tenants at Wild Roots Farm, in Bristol, and plans to continue into the 2023-2024 school year. We are at a point in our school's evolution where we **must** find our own site for the security and financial stability of the program. There are multiple challenges associated with renting from a working farm and homestead, not the least of which is the overhead of rent and the need to schedule community events or summer activities around our landlord's schedule, but also the challenge and uncertainty of a future as tenants, as felt from our relocation upheaval in 2020. Funds from the Bristol ARPA funds will allow this thriving and popular preschool to expand with permanent roots in Bristol, Vermont, offering three more full time slots per year and reserving twenty percent of those spots for low-to-moderate-income families.

This funding request not only has the capacity to serve lower income families in our community through supporting the growth of our preschool, it also can bolster and sustain the longevity of Vermont's workforce. Willowell has a twenty-two year history hosting AmeriCorps service members at our site. These members come to intern, work with youth, build capacity and alleviate poverty in our community—all while living on a stipend of federal minimum wage for the entire year they serve with us.

The matching ARPA funds will allow us to build a modest schoolhouse, which will grow our programmatic infrastructure, support the subsequent hiring of more teachers and expand access to more low-income families. It will also allow us to build a three bedroom low-income unit that will serve as AmeriCorps member housing. Over the past two decades, Willowell has brought over 30 members to Vermont to work at our varied educational programs. These members live in poverty and dedicate their year to strengthening Vermont communities. The AmeriCorps principles are: Anti-Poverty Focus, Community Empowerment, Sustainable Solutions, and Capacity Building. Finding housing for these members has become increasingly challenging and is a threat to this valuable program. Offering low-income housing options to members will provide a multifaceted benefit: strengthening the workforce, training and mentoring new educators, attracting more young people to come to Bristol to work and live—all while simultaneously contributing to the success of high-quality affordable childcare.

Not only is there a shortage of quality programming to fulfill the existing need, but there is a shortage of qualified educators to fill the jobs of teaching at programs around the state. The impact of our proposal is twofold—we hope to expand our preschool *and* create low-income housing for young educators to come to Vermont and serve through AmeriCorps. With limited choices and far commutes, many parents opt to stay home with their young children even if they would be better served to work outside of the home. This is a key part of the workforce shortage seen across our state, as well as a component of financial strain on families. Funds from this grant would allow us to expand our preschool, have assurance that we would not be forced to move the program a third time (a costly and time consuming process), offer more jobs in our community, round out our summer programs, and build a low-income housing unit for the educators we train through our non-profit. The new building would allow us to add 3 more full time spots to children; pay our teachers a stronger, livable wage; hire more staff; and provide access to low-and-moderate-income families. Our school and camps are financially stable and usually have a waiting list. Funds from the Bristol ARPA grant will strengthen our impact by removing the overhead of monthly rent, giving us the ability to house our low-income AmeriCorps members, and allowing us the freedom to expand our summer programming.

Project Management Team:

Willowell is a non-profit organization founded in 2000. Based in Monkton, VT, we focus on programming that integrates the arts, humanities, and sciences into outdoor, place-based education. We support initiatives for sustainable land use and serve as a resource for local students, teachers, and community members. An eight-person Board of Directors collaborates with the Executive and

Administrative Director to oversee our mission and governance. A small staff of educators, one Administrative Assistant, and 3-5 full time AmeriCorps members conduct our programs that include: The Walden Project outdoor public high school; Wren's Nest Forest Preschool; The Gordon Sculpture Park; The Willowell Community Garden; New Roots outdoor enrichment program; an After School Program; and numerous week-long summer camps for all ages. We have a successful history of remaining nimble in the face of challenge, adapting our programs to meet needs of the community, and managing grants of all sizes and scope. Annually we serve 500-700 students ages 3-18 through our varied programs. We offer generous scholarships to many of our programs, and many of our students attend for free or at a very reduced rate.

The Administrative Director, Tasha Ball, will be the lead on this project. Ball has a strong history of overseeing multiple programs and grants of varying breadth. She has secured close to \$300,000 for this project so far. Both years the Wren's Nest Forest Preschool moved and relicensed, Ball managed finding the new locations, securing permitting, licensing, and hiring of all staff. The Bristol ARPA funds will allow this to be **the last time our program moves**— giving us a forever home where we can set down roots and strengthen our regional impact on children, families, and the local workforce. Although Wren's Nest is a financially viable, popular, and vibrant program, the long-term sustainability of remaining tenants at our current location is in question. We are unable to put capital reserve away because of the expenses associated with moving the program due the pandemic, and the overhead of the monthly rent we pay. Ball will be supported in this project by Administrative Assistant, Leanne Ruell, and Executive Director, Matthew Schlein.

We are very confident in our ability to manage a project of this scope. We have begun the process of securing permits, getting verbal zoning guidance, and meeting with the building contractor who will design and build the school and units to serve visiting educators. We have spoken to a permitting specialist Rick Oberkirch, while filling out the state permit navigator and although we will need some permits, we are very confident in our ability to acquire them with few issues. We have met with the Vermont Community Loan Fund (VCLF) and they have confirmed they will provide gap funding for this project between the time of implementing the project and securing full funding. We are in the process of completing our application for a Housing and Community Facilities loan from VCLF and we have endorsement from Dan Winslow (the Director of Business and Early Care and Learning) that we will receive the funds needed to implement this project should we secure grant funding. We know that this project is fiscally viable because we have a history as a well-established and respected preschool in Vermont.

Project Readiness:

Without funding we would not be able to complete this project. We may strategize to run a capital campaign or wait for other grant funding in the future, but our need for this funding is immediate should we move forward with this proposal and keep the program open in the coming years.

Wren's Nest is a sustainable and thriving school. Moving the program twice in five years cost Willowell tens of thousands of dollars. We feel that our current location, as tenants on a farm, is working for now, but was an emergency plan when the pandemic upended us. We were able to move the program to our current site without closing or missing any scheduled days of programming, *but* we did not have the capital or the time to invest in a property of our own. The COVID-19 pandemic forced us to move quickly and come up with a stop-gap solution to keep the program open and to serve the families who were relying on us.

Now at this juncture, with a thriving market for our school where it is, we have identified a property for sale that abuts our current location. We have quotes from a builder for the proposed project; we have initiated the permitting process, and have been told by the Bristol zoning administration that there are no foreseeable issues with zoning approval; and we have the staffing to move forward with this project as soon as funding is secured. Without this funding our future is uncertain at our current location. We may be able to rent for another year or two, but remaining tenants at someone's property where they live will not be a long-term solution for Wren's Nest Preschool. We are limited by the number of weeks we run summer programs (a dire need in our community), by the overhead of rent, and by the challenging dynamics of sharing space, parking, and resources with our landlords.

Willowell has a long track record of managing grants to completion, handling large donations with integrity and collaborating with financial partners. Over the years in this aspect of work, we have developed organizational systems and practices which have kept us accountable to our partners and funders, maintaining organization and compliance with the various stipulations of each award and/or partnership. The members of the administrative team are clear in their roles, work to ensure proper follow through, and adherence to guidelines as new developments emerge.

We thank the Bristol ARPA committee and the Selectboard for their time carefully allocating these funds for our town and for considering this project.

Please reach out if you have any further questions.

Project Budget:

Expenses	Details	
Land	3 acre developed lot	\$120,000.00
Building	Two 1,500 sq feet 3 bedroom buildings. Or one 3,000 sq feet (TBD)	\$800,000.00
Closing costs	Property transfer tax and legal fees	\$6,000.00
Staff project oversight	Managing all aspects of defining project on time, licensing and moving program	\$72,800.00
Permitting fees	Fees associated with acquiring permits and ANR or legal fees	\$125,000.00
Furnishings	Beds, furniture, appliances for furnished apartments. As well as chairs, tables, cubbies for school, outdoor classroom safety (fencing, etc)	\$100,000.00
Staff labor moving program		\$10,000.00
Landscaping and parking area		\$172,000.00
Infrastructure and maintenance needs	Land maintenance equipment and gear storage shed	\$75,000.00
Total Expenses		\$1,480,800.00
Income		
Bristol ARPA (pending)		\$200,000.00
CRR funds (secured)		\$281,760.00
Donor appeal (pending)		\$100,000.00
Other grants (pending, but in process)		\$827,040.00
In kind		\$72,000.00
Total Income		\$1,480,800.00