



Steering Committee Meeting Notes

1:00 – 2:30 PM

April 8, 2020

Present: Michele Bailey, Michael Billingsley, Sally Blanchard-O'Brien, Carrie Cleveland, Eileen Corcoran, Carol Devlin, Jamie Duggan, Ann Lawless, Tom McMurdo, Rachel Moore, Rachel Onuf, Ben Rose, Joseph Watson

Regrets: Sarah Amos, Carolyn Frisa

Check-Ins, including Covid-19 impact and response

Michele and Amy: They are gathering resources about Covid-19 for their constituents, including funding assistance and methods for online work. These resources are posted on the Vermont Arts Council site. Their board approved the Artists' Rapid Response Fund, a first pass created quickly from board financial reserves, and they've already received 183 applicants. Passage of the CARES Act will provide more opportunities with \$75 million going to the National Endowment for the Arts (and another \$75 million to the National Endowment for the Humanities). Vermont Arts Council will be receiving \$420,000 of the NEA money, possibly before the end of April, and they are working on how to equitably distribute the funds to arts organizations. Other announcements will be forthcoming soon about private funding sources and updates to VAC's grant applications, such as extended deadlines and broadened guidelines. The Cultural Facilities Grant deadline has already been extended to July 27th.

Michael: He has been figuring out ways to keep community services, projects, and events going in different formats, including the regular community suppers. A team of four was able to prepare and distribute 65 suppers to the community while observing current protocols. The team has lined up funding for the next two months, including support from United Way. He now has a space for house concerts and is exploring various ways to monetize online access to benefit participating musicians. He also recently attended a forum held by *Wired* magazine that discussed the US approach to handling the pandemic.

Sally: The Vermont State Archives and Records Administration has been closed to the public for a couple of weeks and most staff, unless essential, have been working from home since the Governor's Stay at Home order. While technically providing services, the staff is disconnected from collections and thus reference work is virtually not happening. Staff doesn't have a lot to do from home, so most have been concentrating on using this time for online learning and professional development. Sally has also been working with Rachel on the VACDaRN website.

Carrie: CERF+ launched a survey of craft artists to see where they are in the midst of the pandemic. Currently, median losses are at about \$3,000 per artist, and are projected to be at \$10,000 three months out. They are using this information to advocate at the Federal level. They are also trying to get out more information to their constituents about the CARES Act and aggregating and sharing resources. CERF+ currently has a Covid-19 relief fund that is focused on mitigating anticipated heavy medical impact on artists. A mega-fund, <https://www.artistrelief.org/>, was just launched by a coalition of national arts grantmakers.

Eileen: The Vermont Historical Society has been closed, and they have been gathering what they can to move online. They've been hosting more online events, including a trivia night on Wednesdays and virtual roundtables. History Day will now be held entirely online, both at the state and national level. They've been getting a lot of questions about resources for online learning and homeschooling. They will soon be pushing out a collecting project for documenting Covid-19 (<http://covid-19.digitalvermont.org/>), focused on archival materials, in a similar vein to the Vermont Folklife Center's Listening in Place project (<https://www.vermontfolklifecenter.org/listening>). However, this is a public-facing initiative, and they've been looking at documenting the impact institutionally as well. They are also asking themselves what more can they develop for the online environment, because no one knows how long this will last.

Carol: The Bolton Town Clerk's office has been closed to the public for three weeks. The clerk and assistant clerk have been at the office Monday through Friday 8-4, alternating who is there to maintain social distancing. They have had to figure out how to maintain their services, with researchers presenting the greatest challenge. However, they have managed to get their land record index online so researchers can identify what they need, and copies can be made. Town clerks all over the state with digital records are trying to make them more available on their websites. The Bolton Town Clerk's office is also working with a local volunteer group to coordinate services for community members, and they are also working with the local health officer to make sure what they are doing is appropriate. Town clerks are communicating through the VMCTA and muninet listserv; some need more help and guidance than others, as they were elected just 6 days before the shutdown.

Jamie: All Historic Preservation Division staff members are now working remotely and generally available. They were in the middle of a hire which has been paused. This time away from the office has offered some opportunities for improvement – for example, business processes are now entirely digital, and they've had more time to work on the state plan for historic preservation for the Federal government. It was lucky that the state historic sites were already closed for the season – they are now looking to June 19th for a grand reopening of all state sites, but it is also possible sites won't reopen this year. They have reexamined their cleaning policies in historic sites, something they hadn't considered much before, and are having to rethink their spaces – some are tight, and a lot of their clientele are older and part of the population vulnerable to Covid-19. They have also had challenges servicing the

sites, as hiring repair workers and contractors for Spring cleanup has been difficult. Soon, the Division will be sending out a survey to the public to help come up with future programming.

Ann: She has been involved with the Northeast Kingdom Collaborative, which coordinates services in the community and connects through Zoom meetings and Front Porch Forum, though the group hasn't done much yet with the arts. Wheelock was the first to apply for a wi-fi hotspot in their town hall, which will be very useful, as many people in the area don't have internet access. Wheelock participated in the Vermont Council on Rural Development's Community Visit program, which resulted in this newly-released report: <https://www.vtrural.org/programs/community-visits/report/wheelock>.

Tom: Department of Libraries employees are mostly working remotely, and they have been in triage mode for the last three weeks, fighting off bad information and getting good information out. They've been answering questions and providing guidance, but VTLIB does not have authority over libraries so cannot exert a clear chain of command, as might be desirable at times like this. VTLIB established their own page of Covid-19 information, have been pushing out state information to their distribution lists, and have been focusing on promoting their digital resources. As of now, it's unclear how much money libraries will get from the CARES Act, but VTLIB will be the primary grantor. Vermont libraries have already seen furloughs and layoffs of part-time employees. At the same time, libraries have proven their value to their communities, including the 150 libraries that offer 24/7 wi-fi. The Department has had more of a push for emergency planning. They have also been investigating the persistence of the virus on surfaces, including library books.

Michael brought up that closed libraries can be vulnerable to theft and damage, as evidenced by a break-in at the Cutler Memorial Library in Plainfield.

Rachel Moore: Because of the flood last year, the Helen Day Art Center feels like they can get through anything! They tried to be proactive with the pandemic and closed the building and postponed/canceled events and classes early. They were able to move many offerings online, including classes, resources, and some events like poetry readings and artist studio tours (and trying to pay artists for those). They are trying to be a resource for artists, supportive of the community, and send messages of solidarity. The Center is part of Vermont Art Online, a collection of virtual gallery tours (<https://www.vermontartonline.org/>). They have had a continuing push for emergency preparedness initiatives. However, they are trying to figure out how to recoup the losses from their canceled fundraiser, and they've had to pause a hiring process and campaign they were about to launch.

Rachel Onuf: Has been working remotely for several weeks. She did a Facebook Live stream for the Vermont Historical Society on women's suffrage in the state with Lyn Blackwell, and she will be doing a follow-up later this month about how to do primary source research in voting records. She has been working with the Vermont Suffrage Centennial Alliance to determine what events can move forward and which must be postponed or canceled, as well as the appropriateness of fundraising for events when public health needs must be foremost. She has also been working with Sally on the VACDaRN website.

Joseph: Middlebury College closed on March 11, one of the first colleges in the state to do so. They extended spring break for a week, students had four days to pack up and leave, and instructors and libraries had two weeks to prepare for online learning – which went better than expected. They were also able to digitize 1,500 letters from the Rokeby Museum's Robinson Collection and provide online access in time for the start of classes. They have also created projects for library staff who need work to

do from home, such as transcription projects, which has been a bonus, since normally they would not have time to do that kind of work. They have been working on a Covid-19 documentation project with students from an Emily Dickinson class.

Ben: Feels that this situation is like Tropical Storm Irene all over again. The President approved Vermont's disaster declaration today (<https://www.fema.gov/disaster/4532>) and applicant briefings will begin next week. Funds will be redirected to state agencies. A lot of funding sources have shifted focus to more direct services. We are living in an historic moment and a lot of arts are coming out of this shared experience.

Ben asked the rest of the committee what concerns the arts world has for emergency management, and Amy and Michele emphasized the layoffs they've seen in the arts sector and that lack of ticket sales have endangered arts organizations. Rachel Moore brought up that the Helen Day Art Center doesn't charge for events and relies on donations – often from small businesses that are hurting right now and can't be asked to donate. Ben stated that progress from the Small Business Association has been slow. Michael brought up the recovery site being planned for Goddard College, and that some community members feel left out of the conversation. Ben stated that ideally, the state is over-planning: the way the numbers look now, people may not need those emergency facilities. Amy and Michele mentioned that the Vermont Community Foundation has already distributed \$300,000 for direct services and that they are collaborating with VAC on an arts-oriented grant program.

Review and discussion of draft website/Discussion of communications and outreach

It was decided to table the review of the website and discuss Facebook and other communications plans during the next meeting. However, there was a quick discussion of including arts and culture in recovery and resilience and linking to a list of virtual art experiences and opportunities on the Covid-19 page.