



Steering Committee Meeting Notes

2:30 – 4:00 PM

April 23, 2020

Present: Sally Blanchard-O'Brien, Carrie Cleveland, Eileen Corcoran, Amy Cunningham, Jamie Duggan, Carolyn Frisa, Ann Lawless, Rachel Onuf, Ben Rose, Joseph Watson

Check-Ins, including Covid-19 impact and response

Ben: The Emergency Operations Center is returning to normal this coming weekend and will no longer be in full deployment mode. Vermont is successfully flattening the curve. As the immediate need for resources recedes, the state wants to share its medical resources with other states that need them. Vermont has received 17 proposals for a high-level consultancy, but the state's needs have changed since they issued the RFP. Instead of assisting with response, they now need help with long-term economic recovery. Vermont has received \$1.25 billion from the CARES Act but the Vermont economy is estimated to be losing \$1 billion per month. The state needs someone who can help make the best match between available funds and identified needs and help prioritize which sectors get financial assistance and in what sequence.

Amy: Vermont Arts Council has been looking for appropriate channels to communicate information to constituents and having a cohesive message. Small teams of people in the creative sector will join legislators and begin talking with the Governor's Economic Recovery Task Force. VAC is the main source of information for the arts and culture sector and has created an online form for people to submit questions and sign up for information. The artist quick response financial grants application period has been reopened until mid-May, and the cultural relief grants, in partnership with the Vermont Humanities Council, have just opened to distribute CARES Act funds to arts and culture organizations. The application period is open until the end of May and will bring tiered relief packages based the applicant's operating budget size. The Department of Labor has opened Pandemic Unemployment Assistance for freelance artists. The National Endowment for the Humanities has just released their guidelines for relief funding and it looks fairly broad – we should encourage our respective cultural organizations to take a close look at the guidelines and consider applying.

Carrie: CERF+ has been very involved in CARES Act advocacy, as fund availability differs between states, and are soliciting feedback to see how the CARES Act is working. These funds are still not available in 13 states. CERF+ has had conversations with partners about what arts recovery looks like in a WPA-style recovery. They also have continued to hear from and serve artists with non-Covid related emergencies.

Jamie: The Division of Historic Preservation is in a holding pattern, unsure about what their programming looks like or how sites might open. They are looking at potential buildings and sites to keep closed and making recommendations to leadership. The State has put a freeze on hiring, travel, and professional development, so DHP can't hire seasonal staff – nor are they sure they will need them, or if they will have the funds to pay them, since they rely on revenue streams like gift shops. The Division is prioritizing outdoor projects, trying to focus on grounds, but this could also be a good time for interior building projects if some buildings remain closed to the public.

Rachel O.: Secretary of State's office is fortunately unaffected by state hiring freeze because the agency has no vacancies, and VSARA staff was able to get approval for some professional development training just before the freeze went into effect. Some essential workers worked on site a couple days a week and now other staff members are starting to come back to the office. The Society of American Archivists has established May 1st as May Day – an opportunity to focus on emergency preparedness activities. The Collections Care and Conservation Alliance are holding a workshop about mold in June, which they hope to still have in-person, though it can be made virtual if necessary.

Eileen: Vermont Historical Society is continuing their virtual event/content planning until June, and there is no specific date for reopening the museum and library. Virtual events have been going very well. VHS is in a holding pattern, figuring out what the next best steps are.

Joseph: Middlebury College summer programs have been moved online, the June writers' conference has been cancelled, and a decision on the August writers' conference will be made in June. The library is using this time as an opportunity to look at business continuity plans – determining what work is essential, who is responsible for it, and who is a backup. Joseph has also had time to work on the collections recovery manual.

Carolyn: She has closed her normal studio and has been working in an offsite location. Most of her larger conservation projects are on hold, though she has established a new protocol for exchanging materials with clients on a smaller scale and has been able to do some remote consulting. She is surprised that she has not heard about many collections emergencies during this period, but suspects there will be an increase once people return to their buildings.

Ann: The Wheelock selectboard held their first-ever remote meeting over Zoom and it went well. Ann has been helping with the hazard mitigation plan for her regional planning commission that includes four towns. The Northeast Kingdom Collaborative has really stepped up their work. She has been seeing more communications between towns since the pandemic started.

Sally: The Vermont State Archives and Records Administration has been closed to the public and most staff have been working from home. Some staff members, including Sally, have been returning to the office to catch up on work that can only be done on-site, such as processing and responding to requests for copies of archival records. VSARA staff have been concentrating on using this time for online learning and professional development. Sally has also been working with Rachel Onuf on the VACDaRN website.

Review and discussion of draft website

Sally walked the committee through the general structure of the website. The focus on development at this point was to establish the look and feel of the site, and to ensure a consistent, clear navigation. Overall, the reception for the site was very positive, with few changes to be made. Sally put out a request for more resources to include on the site, especially for individual artists, and Carrie offered to help with this section. Thanks to all who have submitted brief bios for the site – we only need a couple more!

Discussion of communications and outreach

Amy and Rachel O. led the discussion on whether it is worth the organization's time and effort to have a social media presence or email distribution list.

Facebook: Most felt that having a Facebook page isn't a bad idea, as it's a great way to connect with people, especially during a crisis, but that having a social media presence in general can be very time consuming. However, many individual artists and freelancers seem to rely on Facebook and there are artist groups active on Facebook that could link to our information. Many businesses haven't been updating their official websites, just their Facebook pages during the pandemic, which shows how important a Facebook presence might be. It was decided to set up a minimal Facebook page to have a presence that could be readily activated as needed, but not to post regularly or set up any other social media accounts at this point.

Email List: It was decided that having an email list that people could sign up for would be a very good way to disseminate information. The website will link to a Google form that people can use to sign up for the mailing list, and the communications staff at Vermont Arts Council will manage the distribution list.

Another thought for communications was the possibility of creating a group within the VTAlert system to communicate important emergency information to VACDaRN members. Rachel O. will look into the feasibility of this and find out when the next training might be available.