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[West Mich. leaders to help inform \\$50M nonprofit relief program](#)

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West Michigan nonprofit leaders are helping state officials distribute the first round of \$50 million in operational support grants for small and medium-sized nonprofits.

Michigan's current state budget includes \$50 million in direct nonprofit relief. The first, \$35 million phase known as the MI Nonprofit Relief Fund will deliver \$5,000 to \$25,000 grants to nonprofits serving communities particularly hard hit by the COVID-19 pandemic. A second, \$15 million program will launch this spring.

Nonprofit experts say the funding for operational expenses is sorely needed as small nonprofits contend with economic headwinds such as inflation.

"When you are paying attention to every dollar and every dime, how it's being spent and where it's going, you are acutely aware of the change of the cost of one item, or one support service, or the cost of benefits," said Aimée Laramore, director of learning services at **Grand Valley State University's** Johnson Center for Philanthropy. "Each of those are things that are felt more acutely when you're smaller."

State officials earlier this month launched the first funding round, which will deliver \$35 million to nonprofits with fewer than 15 employees and annual revenues of less than \$1 million that can demonstrate pandemic-related expenditures or losses incurred after March 3, 2021. Nonprofits serving rural areas as well as Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) communities have particularly struggled during the pandemic, according to state officials. The program is funded by the federal American Rescue Plan Act.

Laramore said these types of operating funds can be the most difficult for nonprofits to raise.

“Supporting operating costs means staff won’t have to be overwhelmed or overextended to do the work they’re called to do,” Laramore said. “We see more and more writing, feedback and conversation on integrative practices about wellness. ... Well, that’s not just being soft and fuzzy, it really is how you retain talent in the nonprofit sector.”

The **Michigan Nonprofit Association**, along with the state Department of Labor and Economic Opportunity, is administering the grant program, and has created two advisory committees that will help distribute funding in the coming months.

“Our intent really is for people who take advantage of this opportunity to make sure they are successful in receiving the dollars from the process all the way down,” MNA President and CEO Kelley Kuhn told *MiBiz*.

The MNA’s two advisory committees will help to ensure the funds are equitably distributed and reach organizations in need. A statewide committee made up of 20 to 25 leaders from nonprofits of varying sizes and locations will help inform the grantmaking process, such as determining the best phrasing for grant application questions. The second and larger committee is composed of regional hubs that will focus on support for their respective region. The advisory boards will help raise community awareness about the funding and provide technical assistance for applicants.

Nellie Tsai, social innovation officer for MNA, has been running the grant program and working closely with the advisory committees.

“I’d say that our work over the last few years has definitely taught us that movement, and also organizing, can’t come from the top down,” Tsai said. “It has to be informed by our members and voices of people who are closest to the issues and the solutions. That’s really what helped drive us to this approach.”

West Michigan voices

Dondrea Brown, founder and CEO of **Young Money Finances**, a Grand Rapids-based nonprofit focused on financial literacy, jumped at the opportunity to participate on the advisory board. Brown started Young Money Finances in February 2019, about a year before the pandemic hit, and plans to provide insight into what keeps a nonprofit open in challenging times.

“One of the things I’ve always tried to strive for is trying to provide my perspective and experience as a growing grassroots nonprofit with application processes regarding grants and just that whole experience,” Brown said.

Shannon Blackmon-Gardner, vice president of community impact for **Heart of West Michigan United Way**, is another advisory board member. Blackmon-Gardner has maintained a “reciprocal partnership over the years” with the MNA.

Blackmon-Gardner will help craft a marketing strategy to raise community awareness about the state funding. She also draws on her experience of working with local nonprofits to identify nonprofit sectors with urgent funding needs. Food pantries, in particular, are experiencing the pressures of inflation as donations slow down. She also noted access to health care, mental health and housing as ongoing needs in the community.

“Many people still cannot afford rent even though they’re working multiple jobs,” Blackmon-Gardner said. “The length of stay remains high in a lot of shelters, so that’s really good feedback for me to be able to take and say, ‘Hey, here’s what nonprofits are struggling with.’”

Blackmon-Gardner said that equity and accessibility have been crucial components of the grant planning process.

“Another part of my role is making sure that I’m engaging with stakeholders in the distribution and assistance with applying. I’m especially encouraging our BIPOC-led nonprofits who typically don’t often get funding,” Blackmon-Gardner said. “We’re being very intentional when we’re looking at all these (nonprofits) that exist in certain regions or communities and neighborhoods.”

Advisory board members also will monitor the grants after they’ve been awarded to ensure they reach their full potential.

“What we’ve learned is that, even for a lot of the small nonprofits, they have the passion and the heart to work with the community, and try to meet their needs, but a lot of times the capacity on the behind-the-scenes part lacks,” Blackmon-Gardner said. “So we want to make sure they’re learning how to build their board and they’re learning how to have strategic planning.”

How to apply for nonprofit relief

State officials, along with the Michigan Nonprofit Association, have opened the first round of grant applications for the MI Nonprofit Relief Fund, a \$35 million pot for small nonprofits that incurred expenses or losses from the COVID-19 pandemic. Application details include:

Nonprofits must submit an intent-to-apply form, a short five- to 10-minute questionnaire designed to both gauge interest and to identify needs of applicants. A more detailed application will be available on March 22.

The intent-to-apply form is available at MiNonprofitRelief.org.

A Michigan Nonprofit Association membership is not required to apply.

Organizations must be a Michigan-based, 501(c)(3) nonprofit or a fiscally sponsored project by a 501(c)(3).

Organizations must have annual revenues of less than \$1 million and demonstrate pandemic-related expenditures or losses incurred after March 3, 2021.

One-time operational grants are available from \$5,000 to \$25,000 and will be awarded in the spring or summer of 2023.

An additional \$15 million will be available in the spring under the MI Nonprofit Impact Grant Program for larger nonprofits.

For more information, visit MiNonprofitRelief.org or email relieffund@mnaonline.org.