

Gov. Evers: Announces We're All Innovating Contest winners

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MADISON — A Milwaukee biotech firm that developed a faster test to detect COVID-19 antibodies, a DePere restaurant that allows customers to “pay it forward” with gift cards to front-line medical workers, and a Menomonie food co-op that developed an online ordering platform to highlight local producers are among the 231 statewide winners selected for the We’re All Innovating Contest, Gov. Tony Evers announced today.

“Wisconsin is known for its can-do spirit and its big ideas,” said Gov. Evers. “The COVID-19 pandemic has inspired businesses to find new ways fight the virus, operate their businesses, and meet the needs of our community. After looking at these winning projects, I’m truly in awe of these folks’ ingenuity, imagination, and creativity.”

The We’re All Innovating Contest was created by the Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation (WEDC) this fall to recognize and promote the creative ways startups and small businesses are adapting to the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. A team of 182 volunteer judges coordinated by the Wisconsin Technology Council evaluated blind entries from more 1226 businesses, ranging from biotechnology firms to restaurants. Entries were evaluated in part on their progress to date and the potential for the innovation to move forward. The contest drew participants from across the state, including entries and judges from 70 of Wisconsin’s 72 counties, and featured a strong showing from minority-, women- and veteran-owned businesses.

The judges selected winners in three major categories, technology innovation to address COVID-19 impacts on health, technology innovation to address COVID-19 impacts on businesses, and service and business operation innovations to respond

to COVID-19 disruption.

Top prizes went to 17 winners in the three categories; all 231 winners selected for funding have the opportunity to share in a total of \$3 million. The grants will help offset costs incurred since March 1 and those anticipated through Dec. 30, 2020.

Milwaukee-based Novir LLC received the top prize for its work developing a test to rapidly detect antibodies found in people who have already contracted COVID-19. Novir's test can deliver results in minutes rather than the days required for previous tests. Simple to use, portable and not dependent on expensive laboratory equipment, Novir's serological antibody test is less expensive than polymerase chain reaction (PCR) tests that also detect COVID-19 antibodies.

The Novir antibody test is undergoing U.S. Food and Drug Administration review and is expected to be cleared this month. Production of about 100,000 Novir antibody tests per month will begin soon, providing more "early warning" potential to health systems, businesses and a general public eager to see the COVID-19 pandemic pass.

Other winners include:

- The Abbey Bar in DePere, which was recognized for going beyond typical COVID-19 health and safety measures – such as employee masking, outdoor seating, and reduced indoor capacity – to offer “pay-it-forward” gift cards to customers who are encouraged to give them to front-line health workers or people hard hit by COVID-19. Owner Kerry Cunard said she has been paying her staff and vendors first – instead of herself — because she believes in giving back to others in need, even in tough times.
- The Menomonie Food Co-op, which moved from a “drive-up, pick-up” system to a more robust eCommerce site that gives shoppers photos and information to help them tell if items are locally produced, organic, house-made or were distinctive in other ways that shoppers typically learned from roaming the aisles. The innovation saved some jobs within the store – especially in the deli – and transformed others with training and a tailored approach to customer service. It has maintained sales of locally grown items, such as produce, and allowed the co-op to keep buying from small producers, including a local apple orchard, goat ranch and Amish farmers.

Details of the top entries can be found at: <https://wedc.org/we-are-->

[all-innovating-contest-winners/](#)

“All of the We’re All Innovating Contest winners demonstrate that despite the pandemic, Wisconsin’s culture of innovation is thriving,” said WEDC Secretary and CEO Missy Hughes. “We’re so pleased that the We’re All Innovating Contest is able to support those businesses who have taken it to the next level and those individuals who own, run or started businesses to take COVID-19 on. They have hustled to meet their customers’ needs and anticipated what new ones might be.”

In its Wisconsin Tomorrow report to lawmakers and Gov. Evers this summer, WEDC identified support for innovation as one of its top priorities to help advance the state’s economic recovery from the pandemic. Funding for the contest will come from the federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act.

The We’re All Innovating Contest is the latest effort by WEDC to assist small businesses in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. WEDC distributed more than \$220 million in CARES Act funding to nearly 100,000 businesses through various phases of the We’re All In initiative. Additionally, WEDC provided more than \$2.5 million in state funds to diverse businesses under the Ethnic Minority Emergency Grant program and \$5 million to microbusinesses through the Small Business 20/20 program.