

# WEDC: For Wisconsin's recovery, let's resolve to apply the lessons of 2020

Posted on Wednesday, Dec 30, 2020

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In conversations with business owners over the past year, after stories of hardships upon hardships, many, although certainly not all, have ended with, "But we're going to be OK."

This proof of the creativity, determination, and grit of Wisconsin's small business owners is the charge for our state as we begin to move beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. We need to apply the lessons of 2020 to ensure that not only does Wisconsin recover, but that we create a Wisconsin stronger than ever.

Like the businesses we partner with, WEDC had to adapt quickly to the changes the pandemic wrought. On March 18, just days into the health emergency, WEDC announced its first program to provide \$5 million in reallocated emergency funds to targeted small businesses. As we close this year, Governor Evers has distributed a total of more than \$220 million to over 50,000 Wisconsin businesses, partnering with WEDC to assure the dollars went to those most impacted.

Our team also created new ways to communicate directly with small businesses, starting first with health and safety best practices and now offering practical information about navigating employee issues and even the difficult mental health challenges we all face.

Throughout the year, WEDC has continued its traditional focus on finding ways for new businesses to start and existing ones to expand, and for communities to grow. We helped Molson Coors bring 377 new jobs to Milwaukee, celebrated the groundbreaking of the HARIBO plant in Pleasant Prairie, and invested in community

projects like a new after-school center in Holcomb and renovated retail space in downtown Sturgeon Bay. WEDC provided Governor Evers with a road map for rural renewal in our report of the Blue Ribbon Commission on Rural Prosperity. And amid this summer's unrest, WEDC provided \$4 million in no-interest loans to help rebuild Kenosha.

Together, all these efforts by WEDC reinforce a lesson of the past year: our citizens' economic future depends on balancing many interrelated issues at once. We have learned, for example, that access to broadband internet affects jobs through remote working, retailers through online sales, health care through telehealth services, and education through virtual classrooms. Similarly, we have learned that parents can't go to work unless they have access to quality child care, and small towns can't attract new workers without access to affordable housing. Finally, the most important lesson of 2020 is that without addressing deeply entrenched inequity and racism, we will not succeed.

Governor Evers calls this "connecting the dots," and this year has shown us how vital it is that we keep making those connections, learning lessons and acting decisively on those lessons.

WEDC's motto for 2020 has been "We're All In." We're all in this together, we're all in Wisconsin. We will continue to promote a comprehensive, all in, approach to ensure that our state's economy emerges stronger than ever. Creativity, determination and grit are hallmarks of our citizens, our businesses and communities. Let's leverage those strengths, appreciate our neighbors, and collectively agree that Wisconsin deserves it.

*Missy Hughes is Secretary and CEO of the Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation, the state's leading economic development organization.*