

AARP: Plan to provide 4 heaters for winter festival wins AARP Wisconsin grant

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RHINELANDER, WI - A proposal by the Wisconsin Trailblazers Sled Dog Club to purchase propane heaters to keep spectators and participants warm at the first-ever Heal Creek Dog Dash & Winter Festival in late February has been selected to receive an AARP Wisconsin "Small Dollar, Big Impact" grant.

"These grants are exactly what the name describes - short-term, low-cost solutions that could have remarkable impacts on the shaping of neighborhoods and cities," said Darrin Wasniewski, Associate State Director of Community Outreach for AARP Wisconsin. "This project promotes social inclusion, one of AARP's 8 Domains of Livability, and works to reduce social isolation during the winter, which we know negatively impacts one's mental and physical health and disproportionately affect older people."

Grants will be awarded each month throughout 2022 to projects across Wisconsin that are designed to improve communities and make them better places for everyone to live, work and play as they age. Judges selected this project for a \$1,000 grant after reviewing dozens of proposals submitted from all over the state.

"This project fits perfectly with the spirit and intent of the Small Dollar, Big Impact grant program," said AARP Wisconsin Interim State Director Christina FitzPatrick. "Our goal is to support communities as they make positive changes that inspire long-term progress on livable issues. This proposal hits that nail right on the head."

On Feb. 26 and 27, Rhinelanders will host what appears to be the first sanctioned dog sled race in its history, according to Niina Baum, a board member of the

Wisconsin Trailblazers Sled Dog Club, a nonprofit organization based in Phelps that helps put on dogsled races and promotes the ethical treatment of dogs.

Competitors from all over the country will bring their dog teams to Rhinelander's Northwood Golf Course for the Heal Creek Dog Dash & Winter Fest. Activities at the event will include snowshoeing, downhill sledding, bonfires, live music, and watching dogsled and skijor races. For updated information, including times and dates for activities and offerings, visit: facebook.com/healcreekdogdash.

Since the festival is primarily an outdoor event, the group will use the \$1,000 AARP grant to purchase four propane heaters for participants and spectators to enjoy warming areas at various locations. After the event, the heaters will be used for other outdoor functions, including a second annual winter fest.

"We are very excited to receive this grant, Baum said. "The Heal Creek Dog Dash & Winter Fest is all about bringing people from the community together to enjoy the unique and fun outdoor activities the Northwoods has to offer. It will really help us provide nice warming stations for spectators, volunteers, and racers; allowing everyone to enjoy the event and winter activities for longer."

Baum said Rhinelander and the greater Northwoods area is a wonderful place for winter silent sports. "Incorporating dogs into these activities only ups the ante for trail use," she said.

The race will feature traditional dog sleds as well as skijoring, where a skier is towed by their dog teammate. Baum said the sport is inclusive of all age groups with anyone welcome to compete with their favorite canine.

Baum said planning for the event started when Rhinelander Mayor Chris Frederickson requested that something different and exciting be done that involved the community. "So, we came up with hosting a dogsled race and decided to also make it a community winter fest."

The City of Rhinelander supported the use of its municipal golf course land and facilities for the race. Several community volunteers agreed to help with race logistics, such as food service, trail preparation, dog handling, and photo taking. Many local organizations are sponsoring the race, and businesses have contributed items such as pasties, specialty beers and discounted snowshoe rentals.

“The whole purpose of the event is to bring community members together to help build more inclusive activities that anyone can safely join in,” Baum said.

AARP Wisconsin’s launched its “Small Dollar, Big Impact” grant program in 2020 and is now in its third year of helping proposed projects move forward in rural and urban parts of the state.

Wasniewski said there are many great ideas and proposals for making life better in communities across Wisconsin. “We know how impactful \$1,000 can be. This is our way of extending some seed money to get these projects off the ground.”

The grant program is open to some nonprofits and government entities. For more information on the program, visit www.aarp.org/WIsdbi