

AARP Wisconsin: 'Wheel Hike Together' proposal from Marinette County wins AARP WI's Small Dollar, Big Impact grant

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MARINETTE, WI – A proposal submitted by Marinette County Parks to cover some of the costs associated with an upcoming hiking event called “Wheel Hike Together” has been selected to receive this month’s AARP Wisconsin “Small Dollar, Big Impact” grant.

AARP Wisconsin is awarding grants each month throughout 2022 to projects across the state that are designed to make communities 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 from all over the state.

“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.

Wheel Hike Together will be a unique adaptive hiking event that will be held at Marinette County’s Thunder Mountain Overlook from Oct. 4-9. The event is timed to coincide with peak fall colors as the park features approximately three miles of wide, grassy, forested hiking trails and scenic overlooks.

Over the course of the six-day event, at least 120 individuals with limited mobility will be able to experience a nature hike and the splendor of fall, along with their loved ones. Participants will range from those who lack stamina or respiratory

endurance to those whose lives rely on the everyday use of a wheelchair.

In partnership with non-profit agencies Access Ability Wisconsin and Options for Independent Living, at least five all-terrain outdoor wheelchairs (motorized wheelchairs on tracks instead of wheels) will be available for individuals with limited mobility. Thunder Mountain will continue to be open to the public during this event and the opportunity to use a track chair will be offered at no extra cost to Wheel Hike Together participants. Pre-registration is required at: ExploreMarinetteCounty.com

“Research has shown the value of being in nature, so making nature accessible has the potential to have a big impact in someone’s life,” Wasniewski said. “Working with a former AARP Purpose Prize winner, Access Ability Wisconsin, made this worthwhile project stand out even more.”

The grant from AARP Wisconsin, along with donations from other organizations, will help cover expenses such as tent rental, ADA accessible portable toilets, advertising, and extra trail signs.

“For many, this is an opportunity they would not have imagined possible because hilly hiking trails are typically not conducive to a standard wheelchair, said Martin Keyport, Parks and Facilities Director for Marinette County. “Even an individual with COPD, for example, may think a hike in the woods is not attainable, whereas they would be able to reserve a chair and join in the fall outdoor experience with their family.”

Keyport said picnic tables will be set up at various locations so families can pack a picnic or spend their time hiking the trails and taking photos at the overlook. There is no cost to participate beyond the required \$5 park day pass, and there is no residency requirement to participate.

Wheel Hike Together is a partnership between the Marinette County Parks Department, Marinette County Tourism and the Marinette County Aging and Disability Resource Center.

Marinette County Development & Tourism Director Jennifer Short said she is grateful that the project was selected for the grant. “Funding from AARP’s Small Dollar, Big Impact grant will allow us to provide the amenities required to host Wheel Hike Together, providing a unique experience for families and friends to

create wonderful memories together,” she 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.

“This project fits perfectly with the spirit and intent of the Small Dollar, Big Impact grant program,” said AARP Wisconsin State Director Martha Cranley. “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.”

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