

One of Connecticut’s best-kept secret” grant programs has handed out \$40 million over the last 20 years. Here’s how they’ve done it.

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In this 2017 handout photo, Betty Sugerman-Weintraub, CHEFA Grants Program Manager cuts the ribbon to the new CHEFA-funded van with Gaylord Hospital outpatient Cheryl Chiara for its inaugural trip. (Posted by jsavulak3, Community Contributor)

In mid-March of 2020, the onset of the coronavirus pandemic sent the Alliance of Boys and Girls Clubs in Connecticut into a panic.

Clubs within the state were “really scrambling” to find ways to continue serving their communities in a safe way, said Don Maletto, executive director of the alliance. Schools closed for in-person instruction, but the need for safe learning environments remained for many.

<https://www.courant.com/news/connecticut/hc-news-chefa-twenty-year-grant-program-20211021-3xpt52ej6bfwhcqr6itstfwiei-story.html>

Maleto credits a grant from the Connecticut Health and Educational Facilities Authority, or CHEFA, for helping to quiet the storm. With the help of the \$300,000 award, distributed among the 16 Boys and Girls organizations in the state, clubs were able to transition to virtual programming while strengthening safety protocols for the return of in-person activities.

“CHEFA’s grant was supporting us all along; there was enough latitude written into it that it was really like, ‘we’re gonna support you on your virtual learning, we’re gonna support you as kids come back to the club,’” Maleto said.

CHEFA is a quasi-public entity created in 1965 by the General Assembly that helps nonprofits, like hospitals and universities, access capital in the form of tax-exempt revenue bonds or loans. This year, CHEFA is celebrating the 20th year of its philanthropic grantmaking program, created in 2002 to provide nonprofits outside of the organization’s client base with funding to cover program costs or capital expenditures.

It’s the same program that aided Boys and Girls Clubs in Connecticut, as well as several other nonprofits in the spheres of childcare, culture, education and health care. Since its inception, CHEFA has distributed about \$40 million in grants to nonprofits across the state.

“We don’t want to be the best-kept secret, we want our grants to be publicized and for organizations to come to us,” said Jeanette Weldon, CHEFA’s executive director.

How does the grant program work?

Despite its state affiliation, CHEFA is self-supporting and is not funded by taxpayer dollars. The grants are instead funded by excess revenue generated internally through CHEFA’s bond and loan programs.

CHEFA has three grant cycles in a typical year. One is for pre-existing CHEFA clients, which include about 150 larger education or health care institutions. Another is open to virtually all state nonprofits so long as they operate under a broad definition of the organization’s priority sectors of childcare, culture, education and health care, with grants ranging from \$5,000 to \$75,000. The organization also has a larger targeted grant program to support statewide interests, which in recent years has meant \$1,000,000 in grants dedicated to workforce development programs.

What makes the grant program unique?

Betty Sugerma Weintraub, CHEFA’s grant program manager, said the program is unique for its statewide reach. Most nonprofits in the state can apply to CHEFA’s nonprofit grant cycle, whereas many other philanthropic organizations are place-based and only extend funds within their geographic footprints.

Maleto said local Boys and Girls clubs rely on place-based funding to keep up with costs but receive minimal help from state dollars, making CHEFA’s grant program a boon.

CHEFA’s grants can also be used to fund capital expenditures like infrastructure improvements which Weintraub said sets them apart from other funders.

“When it comes to an organization that does youth programming, and they have a leaky roof and it leaks onto their computer lab and their dance studio, then it’s hard to run your program if you have those infrastructure needs,” she said. That’s based on a real example: In 2017, CHEFA awarded a \$75,000 grant to Leadership, Education, Athletics in Partnership in New Haven to replace the building’s leaking roof.

Covid-19 Support

CHEFA temporarily scrapped its three grant cycles for the 2021 fiscal year in favor of a single cycle dedicated to coronavirus response, awarding \$3 million to 14 different nonprofit organizations.

Grant recipients included Hartford HealthCare, which received \$400,000 to support ten mobile Covid-19 testing sites with testing supplies and protective equipment. Connecticut State Colleges and Universities received \$350,000 toward a student relief fund for undocumented students, and the Connecticut After School Network received \$220,000 to provide staff with protective equipment and support continued programming, among others.

The largest grant was awarded to the Community Health Center Association of Connecticut, which totaled \$486,000 distributed among the association’s 17 federally qualified health centers. The grant enabled health centers to purchase rapid-testing machines to test patients and frontline staff for Covid-19, and create negative pressure rooms and weather-proof testing tents to facilitate safe treatment.

The health centers also distributed over 2,600 patient health kits, which included thermometers and pulse oximeters to help aid telehealth services as patients transitioned to online care.

“[Telehealth] was something brand new for health centers, and the medically underserved populations to which they provide care,” said Russell E. Dexter, the association’s chief quality officer. “A transition had to occur, and grants like this were critical to supporting that transition.”