



## Inspire! Grants for Small Museums

Sample Application IGSM-251750-OMS-22  
Project Category: Institutional Capacity

### Brattleboro Museum and Art Center

Amount awarded by IMLS:	\$50,000
Amount of cost share:	\$61,476

The Brattleboro Museum and Art Center will enhance access for people with disabilities. Project activities will include developing an accessible website with an accessibility page and inclusive online programs as well as training staff in developing and implementing enabling programs and exhibits. The museum will also invest in technology that facilitates inclusive interpretation of exhibits and accommodations for programs. This work is part of a larger effort to develop an accessibility plan with input from members of the community with disabilities, and then update museum offerings to better meet the needs of people with disabilities. As a result of this project, the museum will become a more inclusive space.

Attached are the following components excerpted from the original application.

- Narrative
- Schedule of Completion

When preparing an application for the next deadline, be sure to follow the instructions in the most recent Notice of Funding Opportunity for the grant program to which you are applying.

## **Brattleboro Museum & Art Center Accessibility Improvements**

### **Proposal Narrative**

#### **Project Justification**

Brattleboro Museum & Art Center (BMAC) is applying for the Institutional Capacity category of the Inspire! Grants for Small Museums to support ongoing accessibility and inclusion improvements for people with disabilities. One of the primary goals of BMAC's current strategic plan is to develop an Accessibility Plan with input from members of the community with disabilities. This work is currently underway and has formed the basis for this Inspire grant application, as the initial report and assessment shows a great need for increased accessibility throughout many different facets of the Museum and our activities. This project will support BMAC's work in developing and implementing the Accessibility Plan. Currently, the Museum is physically and intellectually inaccessible to many people with disabilities, and our programs and offerings are not all disability included. Funding from this grant will support the staff, board, and community advisory group's efforts to update museum offerings to better meet the needs of people with disabilities. This demographic is growing as the baby boomer generation ages, and it is a dimension of diversity that can and likely will apply to everyone at some point in their lives. It is imperative that BMAC develop practices in collaboration with the disability community that ensure the Museum will be an inclusive space for people with disabilities.

According to Cornell University's online resource for disability statistics, 12.6% of the U.S. population has a disability, and 14.2% of Vermont residents have a disability (*Disability statistics*). Some estimates put that figure higher, the Vermont Center for Independent Living sites a disability rate of 20% for the state. Vermont has an aging population. According to the Aging Community Survey (*Vermont • key demographics american community survey ...*), "Vermont is aging faster than other states. In 2015, our median age was 43 years, compared to the national median of 38. By the year 2020, the percentage of Vermonters age 65+ is projected to exceed the percentage of those younger than 20." People over 65 are more likely to experience one or more disability - nationally 33.85% of people 65+ and 47.5% of people 75+ have a disability (*Disability statistics*). As the population of people 65+ grows in Vermont, so will the population of people with disabilities. It is essential that the Museum improve its offerings to provide programs and services to this growing population.

BMAC presents art exhibits and public programs in a historic train station in downtown Brattleboro. The historic nature of the building prevents challenges to physical accessibility improvements that we intended to address over time as prioritized in our forthcoming Accessibility Plan. In the meantime, there are many accessibility improvements that are simpler to address that we have identified through the collaborative Accessibility Assessment we conducted in partnership with individuals and advocates from the local disability community. These improvements include developing and maintaining an accessible website with an accessibility page and inclusive online programs, training staff on developing and implementing enabling programs and exhibits, and investing in technology that would facilitate inclusive interpretation for exhibits and accommodations for programs.

The target group for this grant is the disability community in and around Brattleboro. There are around 90,000 people with disabilities in Vermont, and around 8,500 people with disabilities in Windham County. We have done extensive outreach to the local disability community as part of the development of our Accessibility Plan. The accessibility working group collaborating on this plan includes three people

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with disabilities who are member of The Inclusion Center in Brattleboro, the Executive Director of Inclusive Arts Vermont, the Deputy Director of the Vermont Center for Independent Living, and a board member with extensive experience working with the National Federation of the Blind in addition to staff members. Beyond the working group, we have built relationships with Deaf Vermonters Advocacy Services, the National Federation of the Blind, Vocational Rehabilitation Vermont, Landmark College, the Brain Injury Association of Vermont, and Vermont Family Network. We conducted a series of site visits for the accessibility assessment in partnership with Deaf Vermonters Advocacy Services, the Vermont Center for Independent living, and the Inclusion Center, and the feedback from the individuals with disabilities who visited the Museum has been invaluable in forming the direction and prioritization of our inclusion work.

The ultimate beneficiaries of this project are people of all abilities. Inclusive practices and accommodations inevitably assist people without impairments as well as those with impairments. By working to make BMAC a more welcoming and inclusive place, we hope to foster a more inviting, relevant, and accessible environment for all. That said, the main goal of this project is to build lasting relationships with the disability community in and around Brattleboro, to co-create programming and exhibits with them to ensure both accessibility and relevance to their interests, and to scaffold inclusive experiences at BMAC and online to meet the needs of all participants. BMAC welcomes around 16,000 visitors annually through museum visits, school groups, off-site programs, community collaborations, and virtual events. The improvements funded with this grant would affect the experiences of each visitor and program participant, and would help us to reach a broader audience beyond those who are currently able to attend our programs and visit the museum.

### **Project Work Plan**

This grant would fund: (1) the creation and maintenance of a new accessible website, including training for our web manager in inclusive web design; (2) training for all staff in disability inclusive visitor services and inclusive work practices, ADA requirements, implementing accommodations, and other accessibility practices; (3) collaboration with our community partners, allowing BMAC to compensate user experts and disability organization leaders for their time, expertise, and contributions to an accessible museum; and (4) accessible technological improvements to our visitor experience, exhibits, and public programs including closed captioning, ASL interpretation, and visual description for videos, iPads with ASL video tours, large print gallery guides, and other accommodations, and similar accommodations for virtual and in-person programs.

This project involves very little risk. Building on partnerships we have already fostered in the disability community, BMAC is positioned well to take on this work and has significant buy-in from the target community. The funding from this grant would allow us to accelerate the projects identified in the Accessibility Assessment, making it possible for the Museum to deliver on accessibility improvements that are long overdue. One obvious risk to this project is the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Effects of the pandemic could lead to delays for meetings, staff trainings, supply chain issues for the technology improvements, and communication delays with partners. At this point we have developed a newfound flexibility around plans and timelines to allow space for these types of delays. The development of our

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Accessibility Plan has been delayed for similar reasons, with the assessment phase falling at a time when we were returning to masking in the museum for instance. We will mitigate this risk by being flexible with all collaborators on this project, encouraging open communication, and making sure we prioritize each partner's personhood above their work performance. Another risk is the capacity of BMAC staff. With a small staff, each member of our team is already working beyond the allotted 40 hours/week with full slates of tasks. In order to incorporate accessibility projects into our workflow, staff may need to make time and prioritize differently. We aim to overcome this barrier again through open communication and understanding. BMAC is lucky to have board and leadership support for this project, with the influence of board member and DEIA Committee member Dan Goldstein, and our Director Danny Lichtenfeld. With the influence and support of our top leadership, this project is much more likely to be successful.

BMAC's Manager of Education and Community Engagement Programs, Kirsten Martsj, in partnership with the Accessibility Plan Working Group composed of board, staff, and community consultants, will lead the planning, implementation, and management of this project. Other key collaborators include Erin Jenkins, Gallery and Marketing Manager, Sarah Freeman, Director of Exhibitions, and Danny Lichtenfeld, Museum Director. Sarah Freeman will oversee the exhibit and interpretation improvements, Erin Jenkins will take the lead on the accessible website development and staff training, and Danny Lichtenfeld will ensure all staff participate in accessibility and inclusion related trainings. Kirsten Martsj will schedule meetings with the Accessibility Plan Working Group to ensure the project goals and deadlines are met and that each step of this project is completed in partnership with the disability community with their guidance and support. Kirsten will also take the lead on accessibility improvements related to public programming, and work with community partners to find appropriate training opportunities for BMAC staff.

Some of the resources we will need to draw upon to carry out our accessibility project include significant time from Kirsten Martsj, Erin Jenkins, and Sarah Freeman. As this work will take place on an ongoing basis over the course of two years, BMAC staff will need to reorganize our workflow to accommodate significant time investment in accessibility improvements and training. Another major resource needed for this project is the participation of our community collaborators. We will need to draw on their experience and expertise to ensure the accessibility improvements we make will be useful to and appropriate for the audiences we intend to serve.

Each of the four elements of this project will be tracked as separate but related processes. Part of this project involves collaborating with community partners to complete and implement the Accessibility Plan, which will have a specific timeline of action items and priorities. We will track progress with the accessibility working group with regular check-ins with our partners, either on zoom or via email, to get feedback on the planning process, and foster those essential relationships. Additionally collaboration with our partners will insure the pieces of the plan that we would move forward with as part of this grant, namely the website, staff training, and technological improvements for programs and exhibits, will be in keeping with both the overall Accessibility Plan priorities providing another layer of accountability and a well of knowledge and contacts to draw upon. Ultimately, our primary intended

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result is increased visitation by, relevance to, and sense of belonging among individuals with disabilities in and around Brattleboro. We will assess this through intercept and emailed visitor surveys, as well as the regular conversations with our community partners.

### **Project Results**

Although BMAC currently has some strengths in terms of accessibility including an open floor plan, sensory rich experiences, non-trip floor surfaces, and appropriate label height and size, there is so much more the Museum needs to improve to be fully welcoming and accessible to visitors with disabilities and diverse learning styles. Accessibility, like all DEIA work, is not something that can ever be fully achieved or completed - it is an ongoing process towards a more inclusive organization. Through our Accessibility Assessment, BMAC has identified some easily actionable steps that we can take to help the museum be more inclusive for visitors with impairments. In collaboration with our community partners, especially Inclusive Arts Vermont, we intend to educate our staff on inclusive practices for people with disabilities. We aim to position the Museum as a leader and resource in accessible arts experiences in our region, and in doing so ensure that people with disabilities have access to the many benefits of immersive arts opportunities and can participate in programs and exhibits that are relevant to their lived experiences and interests. Our goal is not only to advance BMAC's accessible and inclusive practices and programming, but to share our process and learning and provide peer support for other organizations interested in becoming more inclusive for people with disabilities. These goals will make for not only a more inclusive BMAC, benefiting individuals with disabilities in Windham County and the surrounding region, but will lead to a ripple effect, building a cohort of peer organizations working toward accessibility and creating a network of increasingly inclusive arts programs and offerings in our area.

Our target groups include the Museum's board and staff, the region's disability community, and the larger network of arts organizations in Southern Vermont. Our staff and board will gain new insights, practices, and skills in creating inclusive experiences and spaces, the local disability community will have increased access to relevant art experiences, and the network of other organizations in the area will gain peer support and an example of a successful roadmap toward accessibility improvements.

The primary goal of this project is to provide relevant art experiences to the disability community, increasing access to the arts for this population in the greater Brattleboro area. Massachusetts recently implemented a CultureRx program, founded on the understanding that access to cultural offerings improves public health outcomes (*Culturere Initiative* 2021): "access to culture can engage vulnerable populations; it can encourage physical activity, reduce stress and isolation, and help with the substance recovery process; and it can be a powerful factor in addressing social determinants such as poverty, racism, and environmental degradation." Building on this concept, that access to the arts is essential, that the arts can improve quality of life, lead to positive health outcomes, and that "art museum learning provides the opportunity to open people up to new ways of seeing, experiencing, and connecting to themselves, others, and the broader world," (*NAEA position statement on the benefits of Art Museum Learning in Education*) it is imperative that museums and cultural organizations like BMAC make the necessary improvements that allow them to welcome visitors with disabilities - a substantial and underserved portion of the population.

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With the improvements outlined in this project proposal, visitors with disabilities will have access to our virtual programs and website from the comfort of their home - a way of interacting and engaging that has been a significant outlet for people with disabilities for decades, but that cultural organizations are discovering utilizing only recently due to the pandemic. Visitors with disabilities will find culturally competent staff and an inclusive welcoming environment upon visiting the Museum. They will be able to access all of the interpretation and art installations on display during their visit, reaping the benefits of engagement with and close study of art objects. They will have a voice in developing programs and exhibits that interest them, fostering a sense of ownership and belonging at this keystone local cultural space. And finally, they will be able to deepen their understanding of the art on display, and experience the world-opening effects of interacting with art and artists through hands-on, in-person, and virtual programs that meet their needs through appropriate accommodations. Our goal is to remove barriers, so that BMAC will not be a disabling space, but rather an enabling and welcoming space for people with disabilities.

The products resulting from this project include the new accessible website, accessible interpretation via technological and other improvements, knowledgeable staff confident in providing accommodations and welcoming individuals with disabilities, and strong ongoing relationships with the regional disability community.

This initiative is built on and fed by relationships with individuals with disabilities and advocates at regional disability organizations. We intend to rely on those relationships, as well as some structural changes taking place at BMAC, to sustain the benefits of this project beyond the conclusion of this grant funded performance period. The structural changes taking place at BMAC to ensure focus on accessibility at the Museum include: updating the Board Handbook to include the Accessibility Plan upon completion; updating the staff/board DEIA Committee charter to include accountability for accessibility work at the Museum; updating all staff job descriptions to include accessibility responsibilities to be evaluated annually at performance reviews; and post the Accessibility Plan to our website for public accountability. The staff training to take place as part of the grant-funded project, will ensure our staff are able to maintain a fully accessible website, develop inclusive virtual and in-person programs with appropriate accommodations for people with disabilities, and our exhibits will incorporate inclusive interpretation to remove barriers for people with disabilities to experience the art on display. Our relationships with individuals with disabilities and advocates at disability organizations will allow us to plan programs with people with disabilities, ensuring our offerings are interesting and relevant to the disability community. We have designed this process with sustainability in mind, knowing that accessibility work is never done and that ongoing relationships and co-creation is essential to serving this population.

