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New mental health program to launch for arts workforce in eastern Connecticut

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The Southeastern Connecticut Cultural Coalition on Tuesday announced a free mental health and wellness program meant for the arts and culture workforce in eastern Connecticut, starting with a three-month pilot program of twice-monthly Zoom sessions.

"There is a boundary that we all feel around mental health and wellness that is limited in the workplace," said coalition Executive Director Wendy Bury, who wants to normalize self-care in the arts industry.

She noted in a program summary that the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the industry with job losses, shuttered venues, and audience halls devoid of music and performance. On top of that, "there has been racial injustice, political unrest, required social distancing, and the inability for communities, families and friends to come together," she said. "The results are that people are struggling personally and professionally."

Crisshaun Nelson-Jackson, who will be the program facilitator, compared suicidal ideation to trying to find a way out of a dark hallway but not being sure how. He said this program "is designed to help people find their way out, to see doors that they didn't see before."

Bury said the program is not solely about suicide prevention, but also maintaining mental health and wellness. She said it is still being developed and doesn't have a name yet, but people can check back on **culturesect.org** (<http://culturesect.org/>) for more information.

Bury said Ann Dagle and the Brian Dagle Foundation, which helps grieving adults through support groups, including one for survivors of suicide loss, will be a consistent part of the program. The first meeting is scheduled for 1 p.m. March 5.

The idea originated from Zoom calls that Bury organized after learning in early January that Jason Vincent, who had been president of the Norwich Community Development Corp., died in an apparent suicide. In shock, she wanted to be with his peers and colleagues, so she organized virtual grief sessions.

It was through these that she met Nelson-Jackson, a friend of Vincent who Bury said is becoming a mental health and wellness coach.

Bury announced the program in the middle of the Cultural Coalition's virtual Arts & Culture Outlook 2021 event Tuesday morning — a very different event than the one held last year.

In the meeting last February at the Mystic Seaport Museum, a slide read, "The outlook for arts & culture in Southeastern CT for 2020 is bright!" Bury said, laughing. "Three weeks later, all that went into the crapper, and everybody shut down on Friday the 13th, so mea culpa on this one."

Bury listed factors that could affect the sector: legislative session outcomes, uncertainty about philanthropic support, reopening, ability to host summer events and more. She's also waiting to see how federal funding to Connecticut gets dispersed and whether people will return once institutions reopen.

Bury also told participants that if diversity, equity and inclusion are not among their priorities, they need to be when it comes to the makeup of their boards and staff, opportunities for advancement and representation in the community.

Elizabeth Shapiro, director of arts, preservation and museums for the state, pointed to lessons learned from 2020 for arts organizations, such as pivoting on a moment's notice and communicating better.

Felix Reyes, director of economic development in New London, said he didn't put enough emphasis on balance before the pandemic, but that COVID-19 "was a good splash of cold ice water in the face." He compared graphics showing the arts and culture gears that were emphasized in New London before the pandemic and now.

Before, it was just food and dining, Hygienic Art, Garde Arts Center, transportation, and retail. But now, he said the city also is focused on some previously overlooked gears, such as consumer confidence, rebranding, history and heritage trails, and pop-up shops.

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As a business reporter, I write about small businesses opening and closing, manufacturing, food and drink, labor issues and economic data. I particularly love writing about the impact of state and federal policy on local businesses. I also do some education reporting, covering colleges in southeastern Connecticut and regional K-12 issues.

What questions - or story ideas - do you have about workforce issues in New London County, small businesses, or business-related legislation and taxes?

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