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# Cultural Coalition names Norwich arts and culture coordinator, works on ARPA funding

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Following a year of work behind the scenes to help arts and culture organizations upended by the COVID-19 pandemic, the Southeastern Connecticut Cultural Coalition has named a Norwich arts and culture coordinator and is working with Norwich and other municipalities to administer American Rescue Plan Act funding.

Executive Director Wendy Bury said when the ARPA funding was first announced, the Cultural Coalition put out a call to municipal leaders saying: Don't forget about arts and culture.

The Cultural Coalition — with the full-time staff of just Bury and Assistant Director Deb Mathiasen — then shared some ideas of what to do with funding, such as commissioning artists to make public art.

Bury said some municipal leaders got back to her and said they didn't know if they would be the best people to decide where the money should go. Towns allocated funds to human services and parks and recreation departments, but don't have arts and culture departments.

So, the Cultural Coalition offered to step in, whether to administer a grant program for a fee or do project management or take on a larger, customized role.

A few municipalities collectively took the coalition up on all the offers.

But Norwich is a "much bigger animal" than the others, Bury said: The City Council in September **approved allocating \$500,000** (<https://www.theday.com/local-news/20210910/norwich-arts-groups-must-work-together-to-apply-for-covid-19-recovery-grants>) of the city's first-year \$14.4 million ARPA grant to the Cultural Coalition.

"Norwich's larger amount of money is intended to be more transformative impact, and so our goal was never to be a short-term, small relief fund to just give people money to help play the bills," Bury said, though that could be part of it.

Sarbani Hazra has started as the Norwich arts and culture coordinator, a part-time, two-year contract position. Of the \$500,000, Bury said, \$75,000 is going to Hazra's position and \$25,000 is the Cultural Coalition's administrative fee. Another \$300,000 will go to a grant program, with \$100,000 for marketing or flexible funding, if more is needed for grants.

Hazra, 39, grew up in New Jersey and has since lived and worked in Boston, New York and Los Angeles. She served as the sponsored research officer at Barnard College in New York and then assistant director of the Center for India and South Asia at the University of California, Los Angeles. She also has done television acting, writing and producing.

Hazra said she moved to southeastern Connecticut about six years ago, when her husband was working at Pfizer. She lives in Waterford.

She has past experience with the Cultural Coalition because the organization helped fund her play "Merle's Shadow," loosely based on the life of the late actress Merle Oberon. She has performed locally with Emerson Theater Collaborative and Lantern Light Tours at Mystic Seaport Museum.

Hazra was also communications director for the 2020 campaign of Baird Welch-Collins, who ran against state Rep. Kathleen McCarty, R-Waterford.

Bury said Hazra's first task in her new role is outreach, because the coalition doesn't "want to just throw money out to the organizations that are the well-known ones," but to make sure there is equity.

"I think one of the main things of this job that really drew me was how fast that they were looking to distribute the funds in the most equitable way, and also providing support for people of color," Hazra said. She said she's excited to work with artists and organizations she knows and discover new ones.

Bury said one area the Cultural Coalition outlined for Norwich is arts-based beautification projects, such as façade improvements and public art, while another is improving the perception of Norwich and marketing the city.

The Cultural Coalition held roundtables every two weeks in September, October and November.

Bury said attendees included Artreach, Blooming into Greatness, Chestnut Street Playhouse, Neighborhood Services Development, Norwich Arts Center, Norwich Historical Society, Otis Library, Rotary Community Corps, Slater Memorial Museum, and Society of the Founders of Norwich, which runs the Leffingwell House Museum.

Now, the Cultural Coalition hopes to launch a grant program early this year, though Bury said the struggle is aligning this with the timelines of four other municipalities, because "we don't want to create five different grant programs."

#### **Other initiatives**

Bury said Stonington allocated 1% of its ARPA funding to the Cultural Coalition, which is \$52,000. She said the Cultural Coalition is probably going to do a grant program but hasn't gotten a lot of feedback yet, so it's going to keep having conversations.

North Stonington has allocated \$15,000, and Bury said there have been great roundtable discussions revolving around how that money could be used for shared equipment. She said one idea raised is a portable stage, because no single organization could afford one but maybe several could share.

New London has allocated \$130,000 for a grants program, and Bury said the consensus seems to be that the Cultural Coalition should use it on the front end, to help businesses stay open and survive.

The Cultural Coalition is not doing any grant management at this point for the City of Groton but is in the early stages of advising the city on opportunities for public art.

"We're going to have a nice explosion of public art in this region," Bury said.

She also said the offer still stands for other municipalities to reach out, if they want assistance spending ARPA funds on arts and culture.

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### **East Lyme special town meeting scheduled for Wednesday (/local-news/20220103/east-lyme-special-town-meeting-scheduled-for-wednesday)**

The meeting will be held at 7 p.m. Wednesday in the Town Hall meeting room.



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Following its championship run that resulted in winning the Class M state championship, the Stonington High School boys' soccer team wanted to find a way to thank the community for its support during this season.



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I rescued her from my job after she was abandoned in the parking lot.



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