

The Merits of an Impact100 Merit Award (The Benefits of Going Through Our Grant Process)

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Applying for grants requires preparation, time, and hard work. Grants are competitive, they are not easy to secure. Grant funding allows an organization to build a new project or program that they would not be able to do within their existing operating budget. Grants are only one piece of an organization's financial sustainability plan because they are short-lived funding sources for a specific purpose, so non-profits need to evaluate where grants fit into their financial plan.

Besides the financial support of a grant, there are many other benefits and learning opportunities from going through the grant process. The applicant needs to evaluate whether a proposed project aligns with their mission and goals. Will this project meet the needs of their target audience, and does it have measurable outcomes? Also, they must think long-term to ensure they can financially sustain the project. Impact100 has received feedback from past applicants that our grant process has challenged them to look at whether grants are the best or only source of funding for their project. This has led them to create fresh marketing strategies for donor support including sponsorship levels and donations such as gifts-in-kind.

Impact100, like all funders, has specific eligibility requirements an organization must meet in order to apply for one of our grants. Our website has an excellent section for applicants to review our requirements as well as detailed information on our entire grant process at [Apply - Impact100 Greater Milwaukee \(impact100mke.org\)](https://www.impact100mke.org). Each fall we offer an informational session on our grant process plus it is recorded. Our applicants must serve individuals within the Milwaukee, Ozaukee, Washington, and/or Waukesha Counties. We focus on five major grant areas: arts & culture, environment & revitalization, family, education, and health & wellness which the applicants designate in their proposal. Each grant review committee selects one finalist to put forward to our full membership to vote on at the end of our grant cycle either in person at our Annual Awards Ceremony or via an online absentee ballot. Our review process is rigorous and includes a financial review. It is consistent and democratic.

The number of \$100,000 grants we award each year is based on the number of members we have when membership closes on December 31. For every 100 members we award one \$100,000 grant. The more members we have, the more grants we can award. The residual funds are awarded to the remaining finalists as an unrestricted merit grant. If there are more than one merit winners, the residual funds are divided equally. There is not a set guaranteed amount each year for the merit awards and there is not a separate application process. This is explained to the organizations as part of the application process. It is worth noting that it is rare for funders to have a merit award as part of their grant awards. For 2024 we have 411 members, so we will be awarding four \$100,000 grants and a \$11,000 merit award. Merit award winners are able to apply again for an Impact100 grant the following year.

Since awarding our first grants and merit awards in 2016, we have awarded \$315,000 in merit awards in our first eight years!! (We have also awarded \$2.5 million in major grants!) A list of all of the

organizations to receive grants from Impact100 can be found at [Our Grantees - Impact100 Greater Milwaukee \(impact100mke.org\)](https://www.impact100mke.org). Here are some facts and statistics about the grant process (statistics compiled through the first 6 grant cycles of 2016-2021):

- Our grant review committees are comprised of Impact100 members! On average we have 98 members divided across the five grant committees each year. (About one quarter of our members volunteer to serve on a grant review committee.)
- Our entire grant application process is online. Each organization creates their own account and has access to detailed instructions, tips, and videos. The first step in the grant process is for the applicants to complete a Letter of Inquiry (similar to an application with specific questions and guidelines). On average we evaluate about 60 LOI's in total across the five focus areas. We have evaluated as many as 84 in one year and as few as 41.
- Each of the five grant committees then select about 4 to 6 applicants to submit a full grant proposal in order to provide more details about their project, budget, and organization. Again, the guidelines and questions to answer in this proposal are online. On average we have had 26 non-profits submit grant proposals each year.
- After reviewing, discussing, and evaluating the grant proposals, each committee selects 2 to 3 organizations for a site visit. On average a total of 13 site visits are made each year. A site visit provides the grant committees the opportunity to visit the location where the project or program will take place, meet the staff, and hear a presentation about the proposal.
- After the site visits, each grant committee votes on the finalist they want to put forth for a full membership vote.

One comment we consistently hear from our grant committee members is, "I never knew there were so many small and medium sized non-profits in the greater Milwaukee area who are doing such impactful work and serving such a wide variety of needs." A big benefit to all applicants is the exposure our membership receives to the tremendous range of non-profits serving the greater Milwaukee area. The grant committees are able to take a deep dive into the problem solving and creative solutions going on throughout our communities. Several of our applicants have gained new volunteers, board members, and donors because of this exposure.

The saying "try, try, again" definitely applies to the Impact100 grant process. Impact100 encourages applicants who do not receive a \$100,000 grant to reapply. These organizations (including several eventual major grant recipients) re-evaluate the strength of their projects, ensuring the project is transformative, has measurable outcomes, and is sustainable beyond our grant. They polish their supporting LOI and grant proposals. Also, they work on their presentation skills and select their best speakers for their site visit and AAC presentation. The feedback we have received about this refinement process is that it has made their organization stronger at other types of presentations and grant submissions. Several applicants have told us that even though they didn't receive the \$100,000 grant from Impact100, the rigor of our grant process helped them to secure other grants enabling them to complete their proposed project.

No matter what the size of the merit award, each year we hear from our recipients how worthwhile it was to go through the Impact100 grant process. Strong relational ties are forged

between the members of the grant committees and their finalists. Prior to our AAC, each member receives executive summaries about the finalists, educating our membership about these organizations' missions, goals, demographics of those they serve, and programs. The opportunity to present in front of a large audience of members, sponsors, and other non-profits at our Annual Awards Ceremony gives our finalists valuable exposure to future contacts, volunteers, and donors.

One additional benefit of being a merit winner is participating in our Helping Hands event (along with the major grant winners)! Each holiday season we ask the current class of finalists to create "wish lists" of items they need. We publicize their lists and highlight each organization leading up to the Helping Hands event. At this holiday gathering, the finalists have an opportunity to network informally with our members as well as give a creative presentation about their operations or something special about their organization. This is a wonderful way for Impact100 to engage and learn about the newest additions to our grant recipient family.

Remember....your vote counts! One woman, one gift, one vote is the backbone of Impact100! Each member has an equal vote in determining which organizations from our five finalists receive our \$100,000 grants. Absentee voting is easier than ever with the OPA Vote online system. Watch for the executive summaries in your inbox to learn about the five proposed projects, and VOTE either in person at the AAC or via an absentee ballot.

Here are statements from two of our 2021 merit award recipients:

The Kids from Wisconsin appreciate the honor of becoming a merit award winner in 2021. Not only did the financial part of the award afford us a curriculum kick off which opened at 6 sites this past summer, fall and winter, it provided a gift of networking that is still giving back today.

Going through the granting process with Impact100 provided a lens for MKE's most progressive and caring women to understand more about the Kids From Wisconsin program. The KFW are so much more than great entertainment...and being able to share the accolades and challenges of the program with women who can have influence was refreshing.

The granting process was different from other foundations in an exceptionally effective way. A sincere devotion was evident on behalf of the committees to understand who we are, why we do what we do, and the difference we are making. The entire process made us a better organization in so many ways.

Two Impact100 winners, Lighthouse Youth Centers and Neu-Life are offering music residencies to their youth. Both are incredible organizations that fit the Kids From Wisconsin mission in commitment to our Urban MKE community.

The exposure of the Kids From Wisconsin's mission and programs to strong women who care will continue to be a blessing to our organization. Not everyone can receive your \$100,000 grant, but the work prepared us for our next BIG step. You will see us again and again.

To be Included in the Helping Hands event was an unexpected bonus, especially with the ability to provide a little holiday cheer by highlighting some of our performers. Thank you!



Tina Weiss
Director of Development
Kids From Wisconsin

Dear Impact100 Greater Milwaukee,

Thank you for the opportunity to participate in your grant process. It was a valuable experience, but unfortunately some of the insights were lost because our executive Director, Kimberly Gleffe, who was fully immersed in the grant application process, left our staff shortly after we received the merit award. However, several of our other staff members did participate in your Annual Awards Ceremony and Helping Hands events, so here are some of their comments:

- Thank you to your members who generously purchased items from our Helping Hands wish lists! We did receive a good amount of donations at the Helping Hands event that we are able to put to good use.
- Being able to present at both the Annual Awards Ceremony and Helping Hands events allowed us to share our mission outside our usual audience. Even though there were other nonprofits presenting, none of them were environmental.
- Being able to present at Helping Hands helped spark our creativity! You challenged us to showcase our mission in a new way. We were able to highlight our property through drone footage for the first time to spotlight the Westabrook Trail project that Impact 100 helped fund. Also, we displayed our historical timeline panels during the networking time so your members could see all of our accomplishments across time.
- Due to the proposal we created for Impact100 and the exposure we garnered; we received an anonymous private donation that covered the difference from the Impact100 request for the new Westabrook Trail!

With much appreciation!

Paige Papelbon
Community Engagement Coordinator
River Revitalization Foundation