

SUCCESS STORY: Art Kits for All



COVID-19 Innovations and Responses

This is the seventh in a series of success stories detailing innovations by arts education organizations in response to pandemic-related closures and modifications.

About AEP Success Stories

The Arts Education Partnership at Education Commission of the States is a national network of more than 100 organizations dedicated to advancing arts education. AEP has been supported by the National Endowment for the Arts and the U.S. Department of Education since 1995 and is administered by Education Commission of the States. AEP is the nation’s hub for arts and education leaders, building their leadership capacity to support students, educators and learning environments. Through research, reports, convenings and counsel, leaders gain knowledge and insights to ensure that all learners — especially those that have historically been marginalized — receive an excellent arts education. To achieve its goal to expand access to high-quality arts learning opportunities for all learners, AEP gathers detailed information on success stories with the potential to be replicated in communities across the country.

The Success Stories project collects submissions from organizations that highlight successful arts education programs. These stories demonstrate the benefits of arts integration across the education spectrum and promote continued collaboration and learning for individuals and organizations working toward student achievement and success.

In 2021, AEP added a fifth priority area to success stories to capture innovations by partners and affiliates in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This success story highlights the collaborative work of Waterville Creates, Waterville Senior High School Alternative School and Colby College Museum of Art. This success story aligns with AEP’s new priority area: “COVID-19 Innovations and Responses.”

Arts Education Partnership staff interviewed Serena Sanborn, education and outreach manager at [Waterville Creates](#); Jessica Hamilton-Jones, art teacher at [Waterville Senior High School Alternative School](#); and Kris Bergquist, Merkin Curator of Education and Engagement from [Colby College Museum of Art](#), about their is a small city on the banks of the Kennebec River in western Maine.

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Interview

Please describe the innovation(s) you're sharing.

Our organizations partnered on the [Art Kits for All initiative](#) in April 2020 — just after everything shut down — when we realized our programs weren't reaching people. For example, the Museum of Art closed, and we were happy to hear about this initiative so we could let people in the community know we were still thinking about them even though they couldn't come to our site. To date, we've distributed more than 5,000 free art kits to our community. Every kit includes a link to a [how-to video](#).

What were the precipitating factors that led you to do things differently?

Early on, we did a lot of brainstorming about how to get kits to people while keeping them safe. Serena had an idea to partner with Alford Youth and Community Center, which was already distributing free meals in the community. We were able to coordinate with them to distribute kits with meals, with the library program to distribute kits with books, and then with the farmer's market to distribute kits with fresh food. We even distributed kits from a bus for a while!

Who did you need to get involved, and were those relationships you already had or ones you had to build?

Most of us had some relationships with the organizations we ended up working with. We knew teachers at the local schools, and we knew people from the Family Violence Project who had connections with social service organizations. The kits all included the hotline number for the Family Violence Project since family violence rates increased drastically last year. Those unique connections — beyond our usual work contacts — were so much fun, and it helped us to grow how we were thinking about this work. We diversified and grew the audiences we serve; we're now packing kits for incarcerated parents and their children, as well as kits for people in our community who are houseless and people in hospice. Forming these partnerships and this sense of community was new and very rewarding, especially during this time. It helped us all.

The first kit didn't have a theme, but subsequent ones did. The themes evolved over time, getting stronger and better and connecting more to the community. Our recent kits link to a children's book. Others have been inspired by works at the Museum. As planners, we really paid attention to the balance of authors/artists and works from different backgrounds and races/ethnicities. We also connected to work of local artists like Bernard Langlais, and

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Ashley Bryan — author of “Beautiful Blackbird” — gave away 200 copies of his book. One of the most successful kits was winter luminaries. We provided a kit for every child in town, and the luminaries became beautiful, unintentional public art as families put them outside on the solstice.

In summer 2020, the program was up and running, and Jessica realized she was going back to school in the fall. She started to think about ways to stay involved, so she made it a lesson for her high school students. The program was a way for the students to practice empathy, positively interact with the community and learn about how art enriches it. The students researched a theme for the kit, decided on the audience, broke down the instructions step-by-step, figured out a budget and ordered materials. They also made a how-to video for their kit.

Waterville Senior High School Alternative School has a teen parent program. When students were coming up with kit ideas, there were a few parents in that class. They researched and created kits to use with their babies; the kits provided an awesome way for these new parents to interact with their children. These parents also learned about how important art is for children’s development. We’d like to build on that experience somehow, but we’re not sure how right now.

What barriers did you encounter, and how did you deal with them?

It costs money to create and assemble the kits! Luckily, community members have been willing to donate, and we’ve received donations from the Colby College Museum, United Way and Waterville Creates. We even have a page on Give Lively, a fundraising platform for nonprofits. Books especially are expensive, so we’ve reduced the number of books included in kits and have been thoughtful about what books we’re giving out. For example, we’ve chosen books the library can include in their story hour rather than provide a copy with each kit.

Logistics were a challenge, but it’s gotten easier with willing partners and volunteers to create kits. Interestingly, we found that packing kits became a social opportunity during a time when people weren’t interacting with others very much. We could talk and interact in a safe and distanced environment with other people who were passionate about community and art. We had new collaborative ideas. We made each other laugh during a hard time when some of us lost family members and others were far away from family.

If you could go back in time and do this again, what would you do differently (if anything)?

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We used a lot of single-use plastic bags, and it would have been so much better to figure out a greener solution. It would have been nice to involve the student guides from Colby College Museum more; they did create one kit from beginning to end. Finally, we couldn't get kits to older people at the beginning but are glad we're doing something now.

Is there anything else you'd like to share?

This initiative has definitely affected our plans for the future. We're more likely to do new things for different audiences because we've seen the positive impact here. For example, we've just begun our work with people in hospice, and there's potential for helping them and their family members process grief through art. Our community elders will soon be getting art kits through Meals on Wheels. We mentioned the kits for incarcerated people and children earlier. We provide those kits in the visitation spaces, and it's turned out to be a fun and low-pressure activity. Often a social worker is watching those visitations, and the art kits provide a low-stress opportunity for parents and children to interact positively.

We've gotten positive feedback about the kits, too. People have said, "I feel happier and relaxed," and "It feels to me like mental health." One interesting thing we've heard repeatedly is that parents both are happy to have things to do with their children and don't feel like they could design activities like these themselves. So now we're thinking about programs we can provide to empower parents to design creative activities for their kids. It's been fun to get comments about specific kits, like this one about the bee hotel kit:

I really like the bee hotel! It was so fun to put together and to talk about bees with my son and to sing the Beehive song with him while we were doing it. Then we took it outside to hang on a tree. He went out every day a few times each day to look at it. It was a great time for me and my son to create and to watch nature. Bees are cool.

Thinking ahead to the future, Colby College Museum of Art has a new arts collaborative space, so we're hoping that arts-based wellness programs we started during this time will continue. We miss making art with people. The kits go out and are in homes, but we want to interact and talk with our community members. Hopefully, this new space will provide that opportunity.