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Plans to install Little Free Libraries near Cottage Grove seniors wins AARP ‘Small Dollar, Big Impact’ grant

COTTAGE GROVE, WI – A proposal to build two “Little Free Libraries” to ensure that seniors have easy access to free books of interest and usefulness to them has been selected to receive this month’s AARP Wisconsin “Small Dollar, Big Impact” grant.

The “Take a Book, Share a Book” project is designed to improve access to library materials for seniors and others in the Village of Cottage Grove, which is the largest municipality in Dane County without its own public library building.

“Seniors in Cottage Grove are disproportionately and negatively affected by the limited access to libraries in our community,” said Cindi Kelm-Nelson, President of the Cottage Grove Library Board.

While the average distance to a library for most Wisconsinites is just over two miles, Cottage Grove residents need to drive nearly seven miles to their nearest library. People living further from libraries can still gain access to their services, but accessibility and usage drop as the distance increases.

More notably, studies have shown that library resources empower older adults, increase social support, and positively influence their quality of life. But in Cottage Grove, “seniors live in a ‘library desert’ and this gap in public service is substantial,” she said.

The \$1,000 AARP Small Dollar, Big Impact Grant will be used to build, install, and decorate two Little Free Libraries at senior resident locations in Cottage Grove, then stock them with large-print books. Little Free Libraries are outdoor,

book-sharing boxes, and are freely accessible to everyone at any hour of the day.

Cottage Grove has a uniquely high rate of Little Free Libraries, with over 20 of them spread throughout the suburban neighborhoods. Yet there are none in the areas of the senior living complexes. That's one of the reasons this project is so important.

"The construction process will allow for imaginative art collaborations between art students, civic groups, and senior residents," Kelm-Nelson said. "We have established relationships with Girl/Boy Scout troops, and fifth grade leadership that could collaborate with seniors to decorate the book boxes.

"Our newly hired Village Library Programming and Outreach Specialist has initiated conversations with the senior living directors and will be creating surveys or focus groups to make sure that library materials are interesting and relevant to users," she said.

As the library board continues to work toward its eventual goal of building a library in Cottage Grove, it will continue to look for ways to work with the community and connect with public groups to make sure the needs and interests of the community are at the forefront of decision making.

"This project is unique from all other Village projects in that it targets our senior population, provides them free access to materials that they otherwise would not have access to, and enhances quality of life by providing library resources in a place where they can easily access them, where they live," said Kelm-Nelson.

The library board hopes to complete the project within the next few months and possibly expand it to build Little Free Libraries in other parts of the Village in the future.

"The library board very much appreciates the AARP support for our project," Kelm-Nelson said. "Our library programming mission aligns well with AARP values, and we are thrilled to be able to foster community support for our senior residents."

AARP Wisconsin is awarding grants each month throughout 2023 to projects across the state that are designed to improve communities and make them better places for everyone to live, work and play as they age. Judges selected this project for a \$1,000 grant after reviewing dozens of proposals submitted from all over the state.

"We know how vital libraries are to any community in keeping residents connected and informed, said Darrin Wasniewski, Associate State Director of Community Outreach for AARP Wisconsin. "We appreciate how the Village of

Cottage Grove Library Board used AARP’s Engaging the Community to Create Community in the development of this initiative and we look forward to hearing about the impact Take a Book, Share a Book has on Cottage Grove’s older residents.”

AARP Wisconsin’s launched its “Small Dollar, Big Impact” grant program in 2020 and is now in its fourth year of helping proposed projects move forward in rural and urban parts of the state.

The Small Dollar, Big Impact grant program is open to some nonprofits and government entities. For more information on the program, visit www.aarp.org/WIsdbi

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