

Chicago's Poetry Foundation sitting on millions

Petition asks for it to do more to help during pandemic

BY JENNIFER DAY

A couple weeks after the coronavirus lockdown began, a petition appeared on change.org, calling on the Poetry Foundation to establish a \$5 million emergency fund to support the poetry community. The authors of the petition, the founders of a small publishing house, reasoned the sum would amount to about 2% of the well-endowed Foundation's assets.

The Poetry Foundation doused the idea a few weeks later, issuing a brief statement noting that while it already has contributed \$25,000 to the Arts for Illinois Relief Fund, it would not be making new commitments at this time.

"The poetry and publishing communities are facing unprecedented challenges due to COVID-19, and while we are uniquely positioned, we are still no exception," the Foundation's statement said. "The economic downturn is causing significant immediate impact and unknown long-term impact to the value of our endowment."

That endowment was valued at \$257 million in 2018, according to the most recently available IRS filing for the Poetry Foundation.

Ever since pharmaceutical heir Ruth Lilly donated \$200 million to the Poetry Foundation in 2002, tension has surrounded how the Foundation spends its money. Peter Burghardt, speCt! books co-publisher and one of the authors of the change.org petition (which garnered more than 1,700 signatures as of publication), called the Foundation's donation to the Arts for Illinois Relief Fund "vastly insufficient."

"As layoffs and pandemic infection numbers continue to rise across America, the poetry community is looking to the Poetry Founda-

tion for true leadership and assistance," Burghardt said, noting that the current donation amounts to .01% of the Foundation's total endowment.

Nationwide, many major foundations have taken steps to speed the flow of funds during the crisis. The Ford Foundation and several other grant-making foundations created a pledge to promote "trust-based" philanthropy; nearly 750 organizations have signed on, promising to eliminate restrictions and requirements on current and new grants; contribute to community-based response funds; and listen to "communities least heard."

Others have increased how much they're planning to spend: The Wallace Global Fund announced it would pay out 20% of its \$100 million endowment. The norm for spending typically hovers around the federally mandated 5% mark.

"The logic behind many of these foundations is they think they're balancing the needs of the present with the needs of the future," said Vu Le, who writes the influential blog Nonprofit AF. "If they only spend 5%, and they get a return of 5% to 10%, the endowment stays constant forever. ... But if you have a giant fire and you have a whole bunch of water, you don't give out 5% of the water to put out the fire."

The Poetry Foundation, however, is different than the grant-making organizations noted above. It was established as a private operating foundation, which means it is obligated to use at least 3% of its endowment to support its own programming, said Foundation spokesperson Sarah Whitcher.

Whitcher said in an email that the Foundation was established to fund Poetry magazine in perpetuity; build and maintain the Foundation's building; and to "bring the best poetry to the largest possible



ANTONIO PEREZ/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

People walk near the Poetry Foundation building at the corner of Superior and Dearborn on Friday. A petition calls on the organization to give more in response to the pandemic.

audience, whether that's through the magazine, educational programs, website content, podcasts, events, workshops and the many programs we offer.

"Paying and supporting poets to enable their work is engrained into our everyday operations and mission, and unlike other organizations that may not be able to pay performers or artists at this time, our efforts endure."

A few blocks away from the Poetry Foundation,

the Terra Foundation for American Art — a grant-making organization that supports museums, scholars and educators — recently announced an \$8 million commitment to COVID-19 relief funding for visual arts organizations.

Elizabeth Glassman, president and CEO of the Terra Foundation, said once it was clear how disruptive the pandemic would be, she and her team talked with dozens of museum directors, curators and foundation heads to understand how the Terra Foundation could best use its funds to help. The result was a two-part plan: \$4 million in emergency funding and \$4 million to ease

the burdens as far as two years in the future as cultural institutions reopen.

"We value the capacity to be nimble, to be impactful," Glassman said.

The Terra Foundation also has granted the services of a staff member and \$175,000 to the Arts for Illinois Relief Fund, said Claire Rice, executive director of Arts Alliance Illinois.

The Arts for Illinois Relief Fund has raised a little more than \$5.3 million so far, Rice said. The first round of funding — \$3.3 million to 166 organizations and 906 individuals — was just announced. Each individual recipient will receive \$1,500; nearly 8,000 people applied. (The application window for a second round of funding will close Monday.)

"This is job preservation for small business. It's rent and food and health care we're funding on the individual artists' side," Rice said. "We need to demonstrate that we care about keeping our artists and our cultural organizations in Illinois. ... This is not money to create paintings or to do performances. This is food on the table and heating bills."

But, Whitcher said, the

\$25,000 in relief funding the Poetry Foundation contributed wouldn't count toward meeting IRS obligations — as it would for non-operating foundations — since it did not directly relate to fulfilling the Foundation's mission.

And yet, a question lingers: If the Poetry Foundation's mission is to bring poetry to the largest audience possible, then wouldn't the continued health and well-being of poets, publishers and booksellers be essential to it?

After the Poetry Foundation issued its statement about COVID-19 relief funding, about 150 members of the poetry community signed an open letter responding to the statement.

The letter questioned the Foundation's characterization of its financial situation and demanded more transparency.

The Poetry Foundation's IRS filings between 2016 and 2018 suggest the Foundation averaged about \$213 million in assets that weren't tied up in real estate or restricted. In 2018, the Foundation reported that it spent about \$4 million on education, public programs and prizes; nearly \$1.5

million on its website; and \$1.2 million on Poetry Magazine, after accounting for \$703,000 in revenue.

Trisha Low, who signed the change.org petition and works as a publicity manager for Small Press Distribution, said she just wanted to understand how the Poetry Foundation was using the money at a time when so many are in need. She said she wasn't speaking on behalf of SPD, which distributes books for 400 small presses and recently launched a \$100,000 GoFundMe campaign, and yet her work there influences her view.

"It's not our job to make visible the work of writers and artists, but we're necessary literary infrastructure. Without SPD, many presses wouldn't have the resources or ability to get books into not only bookstores, but libraries, universities and major retailers," Low said. "It's one of those cases where the Poetry Foundation and SPD are part of the same ecosystem, but without the ability to get books into the hands of readers, authors won't necessarily have the attention and the careers they want to have."

"And it looks like (the Poetry Foundation) has money to share."

For other signers of the petition — like poet Michael Boughn, who co-edits Dispatches From the Poetry Wars — this is the latest evidence of the Poetry Foundation's "bourgeoisie" tendencies.

The Poetry Foundation's 2018 IRS filing reported \$633,496 in compensation for its officers, including \$388,165 for President Henry Bienen.

"I find it really awful," Boughn said of officers' salaries. "There are GoFundMe campaigns for poets to afford food, forget about medical care."

jeday@chicagotribune.com
Twitter @dayjenn

Museums

Continued from Page 1

Might that change?"

Would that mean 50 in the museum total or 50 on one floor?

Kohl has landscaped outdoor space to utilize, with pathways and play areas.

"With 50 inside, we could easily do 50 outside," Delfini said. "We're hoping we can push the limit on that number."

But, again, it'll be a process of seeing how it looks in practice. Kohl's provisional plan is for a soft opening the first week in July, inviting members in so both parents and the museum can test the new realities.

"Of course, that all depends on how the numbers go," Delfini said, meaning the numbers of coronavirus cases in the state and region.

"If I had to guess I think Phase 4 probably starts mid-June or later in June."

But autumn is a possibility, he acknowledged.

"Our real concern is what demand is going to be," said Delfini. "That's one thing every museum is contemplating: Do they



DIANE MOCA/NAPERVILLE SUN

Guests try to grab and pop the soapy spheres during the bubble storm unleashed at the DuPage Children's Museum during its annual Bubble Bash countdown.

want to come back?"

One way to begin to know is to use as a crystal ball peer institutions in states with less strict stay-at-home guidelines, places that may be further along the path to reopening.

Said Farrington: "We are also really busy talking to folks across the country

who are a little bit further along."

Meanwhile, the museums said they are trying to use this forced downtime to think outside of their own boxes. Without wanting to overfeed the screen-time beast, they have been boosting digital presentations, partly in the hope

that can continue as a way to reach children who don't traditionally visit.

"In some ways it is really a unique time for reflection and an opportunity for work all of us should have been undertaking anyway," said Wiles, "which is to really think hard about how to connect with

families who are not traditional museumgoers.

"Our focus should always be on meeting our guests where they are. Now they're at home. They're in isolation. We need to go online and reach them."

Money is an issue for these museums, as it is for almost everyone else during the pandemic, but all the leaders expressed confidence they'll come through this.

"I don't think this whole pandemic is posing an existential threat to children's museums or really any of the medium-to-large museums," Delfini said. "Some of the really small ones may have a tough time bouncing back."

All three obtained federal relief funds under the Paycheck Protection Program that allow them to keep full-time staff on through June.

But with the museums drawing from half (Kohl) to two-thirds (DuPage) of revenue from visitors — money that has flat-out disappeared — they want potential donors to remember the early-childhood education they provide is a societal building block.

While acknowledging there are a lot of people

with more basic needs right now, museum leaders hope those with extra to give won't forget kids need culture too.

"I think sometimes we're not the first thing that comes to mind," Farrington said. "How I always think about it is, if children's museums are doing their jobs correctly, we are an amazing on-ramp to the cultural lives of our cities. We are the first museums a lot of kids visit."

And because they are more about an experience than any collection of artifacts, they can be ready to reopen in a heartbeat, Delfini stressed.

"Even though we're called a museum, we're really about education," he said. "I like to say the way the schools go, we'll go. We'll be ready to serve."

And, Delfini added, children's museums have a built-in advantage in a situation where public confidence is

"We clean and sanitize every day like it's flu season," he said. "We're good at that, and we'll be even better."

sajohnson@chicagotribune.com
Twitter @StevenKJohnson

July 4

Continued from Page 1

ing Fox News or MSNBC, Independence Day will be a battering ram.

This will be rich in irony: we will have a civil war over the celebration of national unification. And "Hamilton" will be at the center of the argument.

On Tuesday, Disney announced that it will begin streaming a filmed version of the Broadway hit, a show about the idealism behind the founding of America, on July 3, thus giving America a clear and attractive alternative to all of its usual high-contact July 4 activities — the parades, fireworks, backyard parties,

trips to the beach.

The Blue State editorials almost write themselves: Stay at home this year and watch "Hamilton."

Even a few moderately conservative columnists might be willing to join the virtual party.

Once again, Lin-Manuel Miranda and his producer, Jeffrey Seller, have shown themselves to be brilliant futurists, seemingly able both to predict where America is going and ensure that "Hamilton" is at the center of the debate.

Their new partner, Disney, will, of course, see a massive increase in the number of people signing up for its vital Disney Plus streaming service. (Sorry, Jeffrey Katzenberg and Quibi, the world spun in a

different direction from watching micro narratives on your phone).

Now this is not the "Hamilton" movie *per se* (that's long in the future) but a taping of the original Broadway cast in the theater. It's already in the can. It's set to go. And the timing is stunningly smart.

The previous plan had been to delay its release with Disney, ensuring that the live "Hamilton" would have a clear runway for its lengthy summer run at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., and a long fall stand at the Smith Center in Las Vegas. But although Broadway is only canceled officially through Sept. 6, we all know by now that "Hamilton" won't be back anywhere until at least Thanks-

giving. In other words, there is no point in protecting the premium value of live performances that won't now exist.

It thus makes far more sense to keep the brand on everyone's lips while the live theater is dark, and the demand for this virtual "Hamilton" will be through the roof on the July 4 weekend.

As always with this show, it's an incredible savvy media play.

You can anticipate a long roll-out during June, cast members sitting for their Zoom interviews on "Good Morning America," the @Lin-Manuel tweets, the late-night appearances with "Stephen at Home," the memories of better times. All will further the associ-

ation of the show with progressive-patriotic values, and with staying home.

Instead of grilling burgers and gorging beers, Hamilton Inc. will tell us to recommit to democracy.

Red State America won't listen as closely. But that's OK. That's not the core brand. "Hamilton" made its politics clear when it went after Vice President Mike Pence in its Broadway audience; it picked a side and the dollars still flowed.

This show, symbolically, is about the resurgence of the values of the administration of President Barack Obama, under whose guidance it was forged.

At the White House. The old White House.

Nothing will be added but the implication and the

imperative will be clear: All righteous Americans should watch "Hamilton" and plan to vote for Joe Biden.

And dollars to donuts, even as President Donald J. Trump opens the floodgates of celebration, the 44th president will crank up that quieter Twitter feed and wish everyone a happy Fourth of July.

Obama will let it be known that the Independence Day of 2020 is better spent with Aaron Burr, George Washington and Alexander Hamilton than expanding down Main Street.

And at least half of America will listen.

Chris Jones is a Tribune critic.

cjones5@chicagotribune.com