

Metro Grant Direct Appropriation Application
Fiscal Year 2020
NASHVILLE, TN 37215 USA

APPLICANT: The Contributor, Inc. — a 501(C)(3) charitable organization

SUBMITTED BY: Cathy Jennings
Executive Director & Volunteer
cathy@thecontributor.org
(615) 330-3997

ELECTRONIC PRESENCE: www.thecontributor.org

AMOUNT REQUESTED: \$10,400

Date of Request: 2/8/2019

SUMMARY-Services provided to Davidson County

The Contributor creates economic opportunity with dignity by investing in the lives of people experiencing homelessness and poverty through the sale of a twice-monthly street newspaper. We offer a low-barrier employment opportunity and a community of belonging for people who have very limited options for employment. Buying and selling the newspaper gives them an immediate source of earned income to provide basic needs that are typically threatened by experiencing homelessness and poverty.

RESIDENTS SERVED and BENEFITS

The Contributor continues to address the unique needs of people experiencing homelessness and poverty in Nashville. Finding and maintaining regular employment while experiencing homelessness and poverty is increasingly hard in a city where wealth disparities continue to widen. The Contributor currently has 147 individuals who have experienced homelessness contracted as independent contractors (vendors). However, we know through counts that the homeless population in Nashville on any given night is around 2300 and last year alone, 127 people experiencing homelessness died in Nashville.

We seek to double our vendor workforce in the next year by engaging panhandling in downtown Nashville and offering The Contributor as an empowering alternative to panhandling. The Contributor provides an open, low-barrier income opportunity for people who cannot find traditional employment, allowing them to gain stability, access to basic needs and to ultimately lift themselves out of poverty

The Contributor's robust database tracks all vendor purchases made and allows the vendor to document legitimate income for housing. Our vendors report their sales to qualify for subsidized housing and even for standard housing deposits and mortgages. Over 50% of vendors who sell with us for six months obtain housing.

Additionally, The Contributor has renewed its focus on covering issues of homelessness and poverty in a growing city with an affordable housing crisis and growing homeless population. Hard news on these issues will be our editorial focus as will the voices of our homeless and formerly homeless vendors who are paid for editorial content published in the paper (poems, stories, artwork) Finally, the presence of our vendors in Nashville promotes awareness and community between people who may otherwise have no contact and relationship with individuals experiencing homelessness and poverty.

The Nashville Convention and Tourism Corporation has referred to The Contributor as a solution to downtown panhandling when speaking to concerned conventioners and attracting their business to Nashville. They have donated uniforms for our vendors. The Nashville Downtown Partnership has a

partnership with The Contributor for additional employment opportunities for our vendors. Thus, the entire downtown population, both residents and tourists, will benefit from people who have an empowering, productive means of income.

FUNDING REQUESTED and BENEFITS TO CITIZENS OF NASHVILLE

We are asking for a \$10,400 grant to add a section to the paper that will cover and focus on government department press releases and content.

Relevant timely content is vital to the success of any publication. At the time of this proposal, The Contributor is the only totally local paper. In our efforts to engage the downtown panhandling population, a priority for 2019, it is necessary that we provide such content to customers who work and play in the Nashville downtown community to ensure the sales growth of the paper. As such, and at the recommendation of Judith Tackett of the Impact division, we will add a section to our paper that covers press releases of government departments that is relevant to this downtown customer population. This will serve as an attraction and call to action to downtown constituents to purchase the paper, thereby increasing the success of sales of our vendors downtown.

Twice monthly, the newspaper will be published by our editorial team that focuses on issues surrounding homelessness and poverty, drawing from a collection of volunteer writers, freelance writers and submissions by our vendors to provide a unique voice. This section we are adding will be of importance to our customers. Our vendors are on pace to invest over \$4,000 average in each issue of The Contributor by purchasing 8,500+ copies of the paper for \$0.50 and reselling it for \$2.00 to customers throughout the greater Nashville area. We fully expect these numbers to grow.

In addition, we are securing funding from alternate sources to add a section for content that will appeal and promote sales to Nashville's visitors, allowing all of our vendors to participate in Nashville's success. Success of the addition of the proposed Metro section will be easily monitored by tracking the 1) increase in vendor population 2) increase in vendor population downtown 3) increase in overall sales, and 4) increase in average sales per vendor.

COMMUNITY BENEFITS FROM FUNDING

Vendors will obviously benefit from the income that will result from the increased sales. Increased sales lead to more individuals in housing, less crime, less emergency room visits, and less of a tax burden on the cities. Individuals who purchase the paper, as well as the vendor, will benefit from the interaction as genuine relationships spawn from these interactions, creating a more hospitable, hopeful downtown corridor. Content in the paper will raise awareness in the general population of the issues facing our homeless population. Additionally, downtown businesses and tourism will benefit as we successfully engage the downtown homeless community, which has been in the news frequently as of late. Tourism is vital to Nashville, and vendors in uniform selling papers are more hopeful and friendlier to our visitors than panhandlers experiencing frustration and isolation in their lives.

BACKGROUND OF THE CONTRIBUTOR AND THE OPPORTUNITY FOR ALL CITIZENS TO PARTICIPATE IN NASHVILLE'S SUCCESS

The Contributor began as a volunteer run organization to address homelessness in Nashville by providing an earned income opportunity to homeless and formerly homeless individuals while highlighting issues and perspectives of homelessness and poverty in a street newspaper.

By late 2010, The Contributor became the highest selling street paper per-capita in the world, with monthly sales topping 120,000 copies for \$0.25 each to its vendors who sold them for \$1.00 plus tips to the public. 400+ vendors per month sold the newspaper. This growth was due to a unique position among street papers around the world in being granted access to sales to citizens in vehicles stopped in traffic in the Greater Nashville Area. However, this exponential growth overwhelmed the young organization, and the management expense depleted the organization's financial reserves in the fall of 2013.

In 2014, The Contributor responded by raising prices to \$0.75 to its vendors and the cover price to \$2.00 to their end customers. Editorial content shifted from stories on homelessness and poverty to general interest cover stories with less advocacy journalism inside. The new model proved to suppress paper sales income in subsequent years to lower levels than the previous model. Over the next four years, a combination of cost cutting and better fundraising kept it in operation despite flagging paper sales income.

From late 2016 to early 2018, the executive director let go all previous staff, prepared to publish a magazine, and embarked upon raising prices yet again. Funds were raised to presumably support the publication costs for one full year. In April of 2018 the Contributor Magazine was launched, costing vendors \$2.00 per copy with a cover price of \$5.00 to the general population. This shrunk the vendor force and per vendor sales while increasing costs. Ultimately, it failed in six months.

Rather than close The Contributor, board member Cathy Jennings volunteered to lead the organization with the help of co-founder Tom Wills to rebuild the vendor force. All other board members resigned. Tom Wills, Demetria Kalodimos (formerly of WSMV Channel 4 news), and Bruce C. Doeg (Chief Strategic Officer Baker, Donelson, Bearman, Caldwell & Berkowitz) and Ann Bourland have joined Cathy Jennings on the board.

On November 19th, 2018 The Contributor went to its original model of printing a newspaper that it sells to its homeless and formerly homeless vendors, who resell it to create direct income. In two short months, over 140 vendors are selling the new newspaper, up from under 100 on average that bought and sold the magazine. Vendors have bought over 5,000 copies in one week compared to an average of 1,763 per week of selling the magazine. The income from vendors investing in the paper is enough to cover the cost of producing and printing the current publication. Donors have stepped up to cover the cost of new vendor gear and extraneous costs. Volunteers are running all other aspects of the organization, and debts from the previous unpaid magazine costs are on pace to be covered by the end of the year.

The addition of the applied for content will reengage the downtown Nashville population and allow The Contributor to continue to work with vendors to become Contributors to society, and not a burden upon it, and allow them a voice and further income. The Contributor is a vital component to the housing solution in Nashville, allowing people to earn a legitimate income and take care of their needs, and encouraging our citizens and visitors to give them a hand up in doing so, not a hand out. The paper promotes a cohesiveness in Nashville that is vital to our success as a city.

GOVERNANCE AND STAFF:

The Contributor has no paid staff members. Two former staff members have been independently contracted to design and edit the twice monthly newspaper. The newspaper is distributed entirely by volunteers and the vendor force is managed by volunteers.

The organization is further supported by a Board of Directors. Currently four professionals within the Nashville Community are serving as we seek to regrow the board:

Cathy Jennings (Business owner and Faculty member at Belmont University),
Tom Wills (Co-Founder of The Contributor, Inc.),
Demetria Kalodimos (journalist & owner/Genuine Human Productions),
Bruce C. Doeg (Chief Strategic Officer Baker, Donelson, Bearman, Caldwell & Berkowitz, P.C.)
Ann Bourland (Community Volunteer)