



**Doug Millinovich**  
414-418-9469  
Website: DougMillinovich.FirstWeber.Com  
Email: dmillinovich@firstweber.com

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### Prime time

The new Oak Creek Amazon fulfillment center is open — and hiring.

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### Open for business

A new Vietnamese coffee and tea shop will soon be open in West Allis.

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# Making a difference VIRTUALLY



Auctioneer Carol Miller, right, and Executive Director Mary Reich, prepare for their first virtual fundraising event for Lake Area Free Clinic in Oconomowoc. LAFC is among area nonprofits that are turning away from traditional in-person galas this year in favor of virtual fundraising events. SUBMITTED

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# COVID-19 has changed how nonprofits raise money

Cathy Kozlowicz Now News Group

**W**hen the coronavirus pandemic first hit hard in spring, Waukesha's nonprofit Hebron Housing Services had to increase its resources.

More community members needed shelter, and it was not as safe for people to be out in the city; Hebron Housing Services responded by increasing the number of available beds, length of client stay, hours of operations and the men's shelter day hours.

"We did not want to close our doors," said Executive Director Maureen Atwell. "More people were in need."

That means it is even more important that the organization's Nov. 7 annual gala raise the same amount of funds as it always has — or even more.

But at a time when an in-person gala presents challenges, Hebron Housing Services and other area nonprofits are facing a quandary over how to continue fundraising.

Area nonprofits' services are stretched now more than ever, and the organizations are facing a potentially devastating problem: How can they afford to keep up with increased demand if their primary fundraising methods are prohibited?

"We decided to go virtual, which we never have done before," said Atwell.

Atwell said that the key to making a virtual fundraiser successful is to find better ways of "engaging" the audience.

## Creating viewing parties for virtual fundraisers

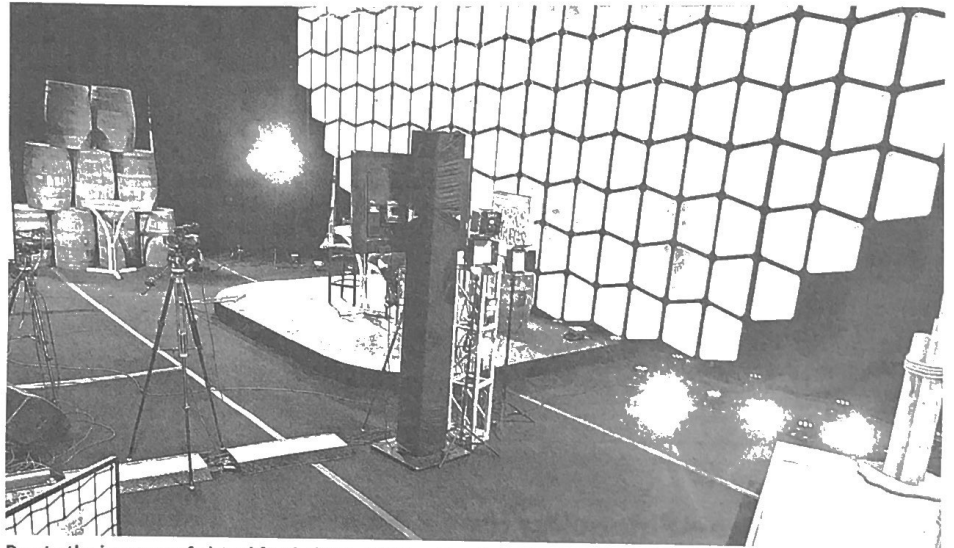
Jill Van Calster, president and CEO of HEAR Wisconsin based in West Allis, said that participating in a virtual fundraiser is similar to watching a Packers game.

For the Packers, people go to other people's homes, have a potluck, grill and make it into a party, she said.

She made the same argument for HEAR Wisconsin's Corks & Kegs fundraiser, which benefits people with hearing loss. The fundraiser was held Sept. 24 and can still be viewed online.

Organizers created auction items that groups might enjoy. "We need to be creative and silly (when trying to get bidders for the auction items)," she said.

For instance, she said that two board members, Jamie Grasso and Shannon Burns, would sit on a dock-like prop, and Grasso would throw a bucket of water on Burns as they tried to auction off two sailing experi-



Due to the increase of virtual fundraisers, Exciting Events in New Berlin has a sound stage for nonprofit organizations to film their events. SUBMITTED IMAGES

ences.

It's not something they would have considered for an in-person event.

She noted that if people get bored during a virtual auction, they can easily lose interest in the event.

"We needed to engage them," she explained.

## Goody boxes to enjoy when watching the event at home

Lake Area Free Clinic in Oconomowoc provides free medical and reduced fee dental services for those in need. The clinic raised more than \$140,000 with its virtual gala on Sept. 12, said Megan Welsh, marketing and development director.

She said a big hit was the "Box O' Fun" provided to participants who either organized an online group or hosted a party. They included items such as a customized mask, a song list of the music played at the virtual event and homemade tequila.

She said there were about 17 groups. It was free to

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Jamie Grasso, left, and Shannon Burns, board members of HEAR Wisconsin, were the masters of ceremonies for HEAR Wisconsin's Corks & Kegs virtual fundraiser in September.

Continued from previous page

register, Welsh said, because there was no dinner.

"It was like being there (at the event)," said Panny Bongardt, a five-year volunteer at the clinic. She said she invited a group of neighbors to her house; they had dinner and streamed the event on TV.

She said groups could bid on silent auction items on their phones, and they would get an alert if someone outbid them.

If people made a donation to the organization, their name popped up on the screen.

"Everyone cheered. It was instant recognition for the donors," she said.

While the clinic didn't charge to register for its event, Hebron Housing Services decided to continue to charge the same registration fee, \$200, as it has in the past.

"I was surprised," said Atwell. "But that is what the guests (the past participants at previous galas) wanted." Guests will also get a goody box to enjoy at home.

"People can buy a ticket, sponsor the boxes, and there are different ways to donate," she added.

### Creating a different kind of event

ProHealth AngelsGrace Hospice is another organization that traditionally had an in-person gala, said Nicole Bessert, development officer. But with the pandemic, the organization did it all differently.

"I think this is time to take a step back and look at our events," Bessert said, of the need to reconsider the way they raise money.

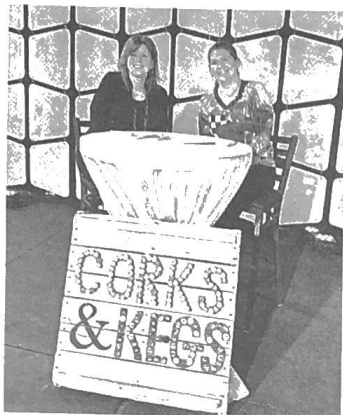
An in-person gala can take a lot of energy. Doing virtual fundraisers may be more better in some ways, she said.

When this year's event was canceled because of the pandemic, Bessert said, a committed group of donors offered \$75,000 in matching funds to the hospice, through September.

Those matching funds could encourage more smaller donations from people wanting to get the match.

"They can see their \$25 go a longer way," she said. She said that the pandemic has the ability to create different fundraisers.

"It can be the most efficient use of resources," said Bessert.



LEFT: Jill Van Calster, president and CEO, left, and Susan York Jeide, right, board member of HEAR Wisconsin, prepared for the organization's virtual Corks & Keys fundraiser. RIGHT: Virtual guests who either organized an online group or hosted a party for the virtual fundraiser in September received boxes that included tequila to share. SUBMITTED IMAGES



"(The pandemic) forces you to think and work to keep up with the times."

Broadscope Disability Services, based in Greenfield, had its 39th annual Taste of Milwaukee event online. Local chefs conducted cooking demonstrations, and participants received a cookbook, said Mary Schinkowitch, executive director.

The event was originally scheduled for March but rescheduled for June 23 because of COVID-19. Because it was virtual, the event was free, according to the organization's website.

"Our sponsors were already lined up," she said. "Overall, it was well-received."

### Doing only a virtual silent auction instead of a gala

Silent auctions are a key financial component of galas. Traditionally, participants record their names and bids on a sheet of paper at an event. But online auction platforms can expand the possibilities.

"Bidding can begin a week early, and can keep (the bids) going 24 hours after the event," explained Emma Fricke, senior event experience creator at Exciting Events.

Melissa Minkley, executive director of Healing Hearts of Waukesha County, said the organization had to cancel its in-person gala because of the pandemic.

Organizers focused their energy on a virtual silent auction instead. Bidding took place a week before the Sept. 26 event, with daily Facebook daily that week.

Participants could also buy balloons with different priced gift certificates in each one.

On the day of the virtual event, everyone virtually "popped" their balloon at the same time to discover their certificate, said Minkley.

### Creating a different v-storytelling experience

With the galas going virtual, more nonprofits are increasing their video capacity to showcase client stories. Testimonials are key, administrators say.

There are actually advantages to recording those testimonials in advance: It avoids the stage fright some people get speaking in front of large groups of people, and it can be edited or re-done if necessary.

In addition to testimonials from people who have benefited from the work a nonprofit does, technology can provide additional opportunities.

For example, Atwell said she is working on doing virtual tours through Matterport, which uses 3D cameras and a virtual tour software platform; it's a program many real estate agents use to show properties to clients.

"We have never done a virtual tour," said Atwell. "It will be a different kind of experience."

### Are virtual fundraisers a trend?

Todd Scheel, CEO and president of Exciting Events, a New Berlin-based event-planning company, said galas can be just as successful virtually as in-person.

Recognizing that need for virtual events, Scheel created a stage, sound room and the technological capacities for nonprofits to film their fundraisers virtually.

Scheel said his company helped almost 20 nonprofits with virtual fundraisers since March. Virtual events have a different approach, he said.

Live auctions, which are a crucial element of galas, Scheel said, need more of a "pop culture appeal" when done virtually.

At an in-person event, an auctioneer will likely auction 12 to 15 items. But in an online setting, four to five key items is more realistic.

"This is because the energy (of an auction) is a bit lower online," he explained.

For example, auctioning off a Milwaukee Brewers first pitch, complete with parking passes and tickets, would appeal to a broad audience.

It would be something a grandpa, parent or company would like to bid on.

"Everyone will want it," he said. Other approaches include local bartenders showing how to make cocktails online for people to try at home, said Fricke.

"They (fundraisers) need to be even more engaging," Scheel said of a big difference between an in-person gala and a virtual event.

"At an (in-person) event, you can't easily walk away," said Scheel. But if you are watching a virtual fundraiser on your phone, laptop or TV and you're not engaged, Netflix is just a click away, he noted.

"You have to captivate an audience at a different level (for a virtual fundraiser)," he said.

Another difference: Overhead costs can be less, and more funds could potentially be raised, he said.

Online fundraisers are in its infancy, Scheel said. "The fundraisers can be greater in scope and reach more people than ever."