



2025-7754 GIG Fund

Application ID

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Application Type

GIG Fund

Organization Information

WORMFARM INSTITUTE INCORPORATED
28 E MAIN ST
REEDSBURG, WI 53959-1555
Phone: 608-717-8699

Mission Statement

Through the vision of artists, Wormfarm explores timeless connections between people and the land. Our work brings together farming, conservation, and the arts to rekindle cultural expression and enhance the economic possibilities of rural Sauk County while celebrating its unique natural and human history.

Annual Operating Budget

\$500,000-\$999,999

Location Designation

Rural

Applicant

Philip Matthews
Managing Director
28 E MAIN ST
REEDSBURG, WI 53959-1555

Phone: 252-292-6100
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Publicity name

What should we call your organization when we conduct any future publicity?

Wormfarm Institute

Project Summary

Please provide one to two sentences that summarize your project in plain, easy to understand language. This description will be displayed publicly when the grantees are announced.

Hay Rake Ballet, directed by Berlin-based choreographer Sarah Butler, is a site-responsive performance created in collaboration with Wisconsin farmers, who drive their tractors and equipment in choreographed patterns while harvesting hay. The project will premiere to the public in fall 2026 accompanied by live classical music, with a student “dance” workshop and public open rehearsal in May/June 2026, leading up to the performance.

Short description

Please write a brief, one-paragraph, high-level description of your project. Cover the key highlights of your project and the minimum programming requirements as stated in the application guidelines.

By framing everyday farming practices within a classical dance aesthetic, Hay Rake Ballet pays homage to the inherent craft, beauty, and significance of family-scale farming. In spring 2026, the project will evolve in collaboration with local farmers, students, and rural community members. Building on 2024-25 research and development, Sarah Butler will re-engage a cast of local farmers to develop the choreography for the “baling act” of the ballet, in which the raked hay is baled and ejected from a kick baler into the air, landing on the ground. Funding from Arts Midwest would allow us to add a collaboration with local Future Farmers of America (FFA) students, whom Butler would choreograph to collect and stack the baled hay. Butler would lead a dance “master class” for the students—alongside a pasture walk with farm host, and Hay Rake Ballet star, Andy Enge—which would culminate in an open-rehearsal for an invited public during the first cutting of hay (June 2026). Farmers who participated in earlier stages of this project would return to share their knowledge of the land and process. Documentary filmmaker Shawn Fitzgerald Ahern would also return to film the process and interview the FFA students for inclusion in a short documentary about the project.



Prior grant recipient?

Have you received a grant from Arts Midwest before?

No

Have you received funding from your state arts agency in the last five years?

☒ Yes

☐ No

State Arts Agency Funding

Do you anticipate your local state arts agency will fund this project?

☐ Yes

☒ No

Project Start Date

When will the project begin?

07/01/2026

Project End Date

When will the project end?

08/31/2026

Requested Amount

What is the grant amount you're seeking? Please refer to the application guidelines for minimum/maximum limits. This field will automatically round to the nearest \$10 increment.

\$12,000

Project Discipline

Music - Orchestra

Anticipated adults served

An estimate of individuals 18 and older to be served by the project.

250

Anticipated youths served

An estimate of individuals 17 and younger to be served by the project.

20

Anticipated total participants

This will auto-calculate based on your responses above and after you click the "Save" button.

270

Artist summary

Please provide details about the artist(s) you intend to work with. Why have you chosen them?

The Hay Rake Ballet is led by artists who share a deep commitment to collaboration across disciplines and communities.

Sarah Butler, a Berlin-based dance and performance artist, serves as choreographer and creative director. Her practice explores how weaving seemingly separate mediums—movement, music, visual art, and site-responsive practice—can produce something surprising. As a freelance creator, teacher, and performer, Sarah has worked extensively across Europe and North America. Since 2020, she has been a resident artist with Wormfarm Institute, where she began collaborating with Wisconsin farmers. Returning to Sauk County each growing season, she has deepened relationships and her awareness of our rural place with a generous and curious spirit. In 2024, she piloted the first iteration of the Hay Rake Ballet as a “pasture performance” on Wormfarm’s Farm/Art DTour. In 2025–26, she is expanding the work into a full-scale production.

Joining her is Shawn Fitzgerald Ahern, an American director and choreographer based in Berlin. Shawn has contributed to more than 40 works of dance, opera, and film, including three Grammy-nominated music videos and multiple Oscar-winning motion pictures. In Hay Rake Ballet, he serves both as a collaborator and as documentary filmmaker, capturing rehearsals, performances, and interviews with farmers, participants, and stakeholders. His work ensures that the ephemeral gestures of tractors in motion and dancers in fields reach audiences far beyond the site.

The farmers themselves are central collaborators. Many are returning participants who have rehearsed and performed tractor choreography under Butler's guidance. Their commitment reflects a blending of rural labor and performance—redefining farming as both necessity and art form, and underscoring the culture within agriculture. The 2026 production will build on earlier rehearsals and previews, incorporating refined choreography, practiced music, and a deeper sense of collective timing. One of our lead performers and farmer advisors is Andy Enge, whose family has farmed dairy in Wisconsin since the 1850s. Four generations, ranging in age from nine to ninety-four, live on Enge Farms in Sauk County, where they care for milking cows and sustainably produce hay as the herd's principal forage. The performance site is within one of their active alfalfa fields. To protect its productivity and soil integrity despite increased tractor traffic, the family consulted an agronomist.

We have also engaged a live string quartet led by Madison-based violist Katrin Talbot, a longtime Wormfarm collaborator (musician, photographer, poet, advisor). The quartet creates an intimate yet powerful soundscape that entwines with the farmers' movements.

Together, these collaborators form a group that stretches across disciplines and geographies: Wisconsin farmers, visual artists, musicians, and international performance makers.

Activity summary

Describe the two proposed project activities that feature the artist/ensemble, including where and when they will take place. If exact dates are unknown, please provide a range of possible dates/months. Keep in mind the project requirements from the guidelines. (e.g. performance(s), workshops, talkbacks, exhibition).

Workshop and Open Rehearsal with Future Farmers of America (FFA)

During the fall 2025 R&D preview, audiences responded especially well to the "Baling Act," in which a kick-baler shot hay bales through the air in an arc. Encouraged to engage young people through FFA, we plan to partner with the Sauk Prairie School District to invite students and parents into a free summer workshop with Sarah Butler. Sarah and the students will work together to choreograph how the bales are collected and stacked during the 2026 public performance. An open rehearsal in June will share this new choreography with friends, family, and community members, while inviting feedback.

Students will gain exposure to the process of a professional artist and to the wisdom of farm host and performer Andy Enge, who will lead a pasture walk of the performance field. We are also in conversation with former Farm/Art DTour artists about offering a visual art workshop to create an “entrance” or “portal” to the performance site. The string quartet, led by Katrin Talbot, will accompany the open rehearsal, and we are exploring a special collaboration with award-winning opera singer Sarah Brailey, who may perform an aria from a tractor during the show. Afterward, we will host a talk-back and community story circle to bring participants and audience into dialogue.

Public Performance by Sarah Butler

Although Sarah has worked in Sauk County since 2020 and has staged the Hay Rake Ballet twice (pilot in 2024, R&D preview in 2025), many of the farmers she has collaborated with still don’t have a full understanding of her artistic practice. We propose a free summer performance for farmers, their families, and the public in which Sarah will perform a solo from her repertoire, “EILEEN.”

The performance features contemporary dance and live vocals, originally composed by Sarah in an old granary during her Wormfarm residencies. After its 2024 premiere in Berlin, EILEEN was selected for the MASDANZA Festival in the Canary Islands in 2025.

One review states: “A true multi-disciplinary artist, it’s rare to see so much skill and talent in one space directed and performed by one person. Butler effortlessly weaved various artistic mediums in EILEEN, presenting her skilled dance technique and passion in parallel to an original music score, sung live with a looping system included, sculptural work and thoughtful dramaturgy.”

Bringing this work, typically staged in an urban theater, directly into the rural farming community of Sauk County carries particular meaning. Local farmers and community members have generously shared their own creativity with Sarah, and sharing EILEEN with them is a way to reciprocate and continue building relationships through art.

At the 2025 Hayrake Ballet preview, one audience member reflected that the performance “felt like an incredible bridge between rural, working class culture and the subculture of the arts.” This new performance, followed by a talk-back with Sarah, will continue that bridging work. We are exploring venues ranging from traditional performing arts centers to barns remade as community gathering spaces.

Describe the community your program impacts

Please describe the community you plan to reach with your programming with details about the underserved group(s) you intend to reach.

The Hay Rake Ballet is rooted in rural communities, particularly those underserved when it comes to access to the arts and who rarely see themselves reflected in traditional art institutions. Large-scale cultural programming often concentrates in metropolitan areas, leaving rural populations at the margins. Yet rural communities are themselves steeped in craft through farming practices, seasonal rituals, and family traditions. This project recognizes that artistry—not as outside observers, but with rural residents as the stars of the performance.

These communities face challenges that heighten the importance of the work. Geographic remoteness, economic pressures, and the demands of agricultural labor limit access to cultural experiences; it is often difficult to find time to leave the farm. By bringing the performance to the fields, and by spotlighting farmers' own participation as artists, the Hay Rake Ballet collapses the divide between "audience" and "performer." Local residents are welcomed not only as spectators but also as creators, with their landscapes and tools of livelihood elevated through art.

We intentionally engage a wide range of farmers and rural community members: multi-generation dairy farmers, hobby and cash crop farmers, and both conventional and regenerative producers. In 2025, 14-year-old Emily Gasser joined her father Dean as a driver/performer, an example of how the project welcomes intergenerational participation.

Collaboration with FFA will further connect us with young people, many of whom feel they must leave their rural communities to find professional success. As the project expands in 2026, we are prioritizing inclusion of more women farmers as well as Mexican and Central American farmers and workers who are an essential, growing part of our community.

We will reach participants and audiences through multiple channels:

Schools: Relationships with the Sauk Prairie School District, including the superintendent (a supporter of our work) and principals/teachers we have engaged in recent years.

Partner organizations: Collaboration with groups such as Savanna Institute (agroforestry), UW–Madison SHALL Lab (soil science), Puentes/Bridges (advocacy for immigrant farm workers), and Sauk County Resources and Environment (a long-time civic partner).

Farmers as advocates: Expanding connections through our core group of farmer-performers, who share the project within their local communities.

Communications: Using our social media and e-newsletter platforms (~6,000 followers).

Civic presence: Attendance at town hall meetings to share the project and invite feedback.

Furthermore, through Shawn Fitzgerald Ahern's documentation, the stories of these communities will travel beyond Sauk County, ensuring that the artistry and perspectives of rural farmers reach wider audiences.

Budget

Expense Description	Paid by Grant	Paid by Applicant	Paid by 3rd Party	In-kind	Total Match
Artistic Director	\$500.00	\$1,500.00	\$0.00	\$0.00	\$1,500.00
Project Coordination	\$1,000.00	\$3,000.00	\$0.00	\$0.00	\$3,000.00
Artists (Sarah Butler, musicians, farmers)	\$6,000.00	\$500.00	\$0.00	\$0.00	\$500.00
Documentation (Shawn Ahern, production asst)	\$1,000.00	\$2,000.00	\$0.00	\$0.00	\$2,000.00
Consulting services (pasture walk, school coordination)	\$0.00	\$750.00	\$0.00	\$0.00	\$750.00
Venue rental (performance venue, field in-kind)	\$750.00	\$0.00	\$0.00	\$500.00	\$500.00
Artist travel (flights, rental car, lodging in-kind)	\$1,600.00	\$1,150.00	\$0.00	\$400.00	\$1,550.00
Artist per diem	\$0.00	\$250.00	\$0.00	\$0.00	\$250.00
Advertising/marketing	\$500.00	\$0.00	\$0.00	\$0.00	\$0.00
Supplies	\$0.00	\$500.00	\$0.00	\$0.00	\$500.00
Postage, printing/copying (postcards)	\$0.00	\$600.00	\$0.00	\$0.00	\$600.00
Graphic arts, signage, website	\$200.00	\$1,100.00	\$0.00	\$0.00	\$1,100.00

Equipment rental (porta-potties, tent, tractor/baler in-kind)	\$450.00	\$300.00	\$0.00	\$500.00	\$800.00
Event insurance	\$0.00	\$350.00	\$0.00	\$0.00	\$350.00
Total Project Expenses:	\$12,000.00	\$12,000.00	\$0.00	\$1,400.00	\$13,400.00

Use this space to offer more detail about your budget

Matching funds come from the 2025-26 Ruth Arts Wisconsin Special Project Grant, and support from the Educational Foundation of America.