



**Islip Supervisor Carpenter**

**Loves those FELONS!**

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# Ex-lawman convicted in corruption case gets \$1.38M in taxpayer dollars for nonprofit, investigation shows

NEWSDAY EXCLUSIVE

## \$1.38M in taxpayer cash for felon's nonprofit

Long Island elected officials have steered at least \$1.38 million in taxpayer dollars and other assistance to a struggling nonprofit ...

GUS GARCIA-ROBERTS, AND DAVID M. SCHWARTZ in Long Island  
Mon Jul 27 2015



## More on Morris' backers, Suffolk Hall of Fame

The Suffolk County Sports Hall of Fame has struggled to get financial support from Long Island's residents, but local politicians ...

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Long Island elected officials have steered at least \$1.38 million in taxpayer dollars and other assistance to a struggling nonprofit run by a felon convicted in a high-profile Suffolk County public corruption scandal, a Newsday investigation has found.



Edward Morris Sr., 65, the executive director of the Suffolk Sports Hall of Fame, pleaded guilty in 2001 to charges that included defrauding the government while he was a Suffolk County undersheriff and the sheriff's campaign treasurer. Records

concerning the organization show that despite Morris' felony conviction, the Hall has received assistance from Suffolk County Executive Steve Bellone and District Attorney Thomas Spota, while other local politicians have helped it secure federal, state, county and town grants.

The vast majority of the grant money was specifically earmarked for Morris to create a museum out of a former Patchogue bank annex that had been donated to the nonprofit, but records show the organization ultimately sold the property for nearly \$1.8 million, leaving the museum essentially homeless.

As a result, people hoping to experience a vestige of local sports glory -- or to see what their tax dollars have bought -- would need to go to Long Island MacArthur Airport, buy an airline ticket, navigate through security and head to the Southwest Airlines terminal.

There lies the Suffolk Sports Hall of Fame, where Morris has arranged oversized photos of sports figures such as retired NFL quarterback Boomer Esiason, former professional wrestler Mick Foley, boxing champion Buddy McGirt and wrestler and coach Jumper Leggio.

Newsday's examination of available documents found that the Hall's journey to airline gates A3 and A4 came after Morris brought a grand vision to an initially modest organization, one that every day Long Islanders showed little interest in supporting but which Morris' many friends in politics were willing to sustain with taxpayer-funded assistance. In the end, those tax dollars weren't enough to keep the Hall's museum doors open.

Morris lamented how difficult it is to raise money for the Hall compared with an organization such as the Police Athletic League, which receives steady donations from parents. "Nobody cares about the Hall of Fame unless they're in the Hall of Fame or have relatives in the Hall of Fame," Morris said.

He said costly upkeep, waning donations and nearly nonexistent interest from the public forced him to sell the Patchogue annex. But the grant money the Hall received

to convert that property into a museum are "all dollar-for-dollar accounted for," Morris said.

In a recent phone interview Morris praised Bellone for working to secure free future exhibit space at the Riverhead County Center and Long Island Ducks stadium in Central Islip, both county-owned facilities.



Edward J. Morris, executive director of the Suffolk Sports Hall of Fame, speaks during the opening of the organization's exhibit honoring county athletes **at Long Island MacArthur Airport** in Ronkonkoma Wednesday, May 28, 2014. Credit: Barry Sloan

**Bellone also helped get Morris office and storage space for the Hall at the Timber Point Golf Course in Great River, another public facility.** A county lease shows the Hall is paying a total of \$500 monthly for more than 550 square feet of office space and roughly 300 square feet of storage space. A Newsday reporter attempted to visit the office at 3 p.m. on Friday, July 17, and again at 10:30 a.m. Thursday, but it was closed both times.

Bellone, who was scheduled to be honored Friday by the Hall at the organization's annual "Nine & Dine" at the Rock Hill Golf & Country Club in Manorville -- where

guests were invited to pay at least \$150 to play nine holes of golf and dine on steak and lobster -- said he was unaware of **Morris' felony conviction**.

Morris said the Hall will not share any of its proceeds from the event with Bellone and emphasized that the organization was not honoring the county executive to curry favor.

"I pick people because they did something for us in the past," Morris said. "Trust me, it's not that we want to brown-nose the county executive."



Edward Morris, right, then a Suffolk County undersheriff, is escorted into the courthouse in Riverhead on June 6, 2000, by one of his attorneys, James O'Rourke. **Morris, who pleaded guilty in 2001 to a felony charge of defrauding the government, among other offenses, is now executive director of the Suffolk Sports Hall of Fame.** Credit: John H. Cornell Jr.

Bellone said Morris invited him to tour the museum in 2012, shortly after he took office as county executive. Bellone said he offered help because he was impressed with the quality of the exhibits, not for political reasons. "The only question for us is whether these are appropriate items to display," Bellone said.

A spokesman for New York Attorney General Eric T. Schneiderman, whose office is responsible for supervising charitable organizations, said state law allows felons such

as Morris to run nonprofits, and those charities can also accept public funds, except in certain cases.

"As to the specifics of this charity, we cannot comment on whether or not we are investigating," spokesman Nicholas Benson said.

### **Lack of support**



**Edward Morris, left, then a Suffolk County undersheriff, outside the judge's chambers in criminal court in Riverhead on June 6, 2000, with one of his attorneys, Thomas Spota, now Suffolk County district attorney. Credit: John H. Cornell Jr.**

Besides Morris, the Suffolk Sports Hall of Fame has eight officers and trustees largely consisting of men prominent in business or government, as well as a separate "induction committee" made up mostly of school district athletic directors.

Michael LoNigro, the organization's secretary/treasurer, blamed a lack of support from inductees such as Esiason and baseball star Craig Biggio, who is set to be inducted into baseball's Hall of Fame today.



"Everybody wants to be on the podium for that night, but when they're not on the podium, they don't choose to help," LoNigro said.

Esiason and Biggio did not respond to requests for comment.



Edward Morris, left, then a Suffolk County undersheriff, is escorted from the judge's chambers at Suffolk County Criminal Court in Riverhead on June 6, 2000, with one of his attorneys, William Wexler. Credit: John H. Cornell Jr.

LoNigro defended Morris by saying "we wouldn't have a Hall of Fame" without him and added that Morris "doesn't make any decisions for the Hall of Fame outside of his board's approval."

A review of the documents that tax-exempt organizations are required to file with state and federal regulators leaves an incomplete picture of the Suffolk Sports Hall of Fame's finances, including how much Morris has personally benefited in his role as executive director.

**The organization's 2013 tax filings show that the nonprofit spent \$20,718 on a 2010 Ford Flex, and Morris confirmed that he drives it for personal use when he's not shuttling around memorabilia. The Hall also lists more than \$87,000 in**

**automotive and travel expenses between 2001 and 2013, but there is no further explanation in the documents.**

**After declaring an annual salary that ranged from \$50,000 to more than \$75,000 between 2000 and 2008, Morris -- who also receives an annual pension of more than \$75,000 from his career in the sheriff's office, records show -- did not list his compensation between 2009 and 2013, the last year available. Nonprofits are not required to declare officers' income if their annual salary is under \$100,000.**

Morris said that he voluntarily took a pay cut to \$36,000 annually "when we had hard times."

Other figures in the records lack a vendor name or explanation. In 2009, for example, the organization listed among its expenditures \$4,077 for "entertainment," \$16,726 for "consultants," \$7,303 for "miscellaneous," and \$2,445 for "contributions."

**Morris declined to provide a detailed account of the Hall's funds**, but based on the submitted documents, the nonprofit had total assets of \$762,211 as of February 2014. Morris said most of the money from the property sales went to pay back taxes, utilities and other bills for the Patchogue building, and "we have extra money in the banks."

He declined to give a specific amount and would only say "not hundreds of thousands or millions, but it's enough to get by."

After the initial phone interview, Morris declined to answer follow-up questions, stating in a text message to a Newsday reporter that he chose "not to provide any further info at this time."

George Waldbauer, a co-founder of the Hall and the executive director of the Suffolk PAL, said he is not concerned about Morris' handling of the nonprofit's finances.

"I know Eddie, I trust him," said Waldbauer, who is also the Hall's vice president. "Everything that was done at the Hall of Fame was looked at by the accountant."



Tom McAteer, a Suffolk Sports Hall of Fame co-founder and former chief deputy county executive, said "if something inappropriate did go on, it would be deeply disappointing because what we set out to do was really as pure as could be as far as sports and communities."

### **Asset forfeiture funds**

Among the most noteworthy donations secured by the Hall is one that doesn't appear in the nonprofit's public filings.

**In 2011, federal records show the Suffolk Sports Hall of Fame was the beneficiary of \$25,000 in asset forfeiture funds controlled by Spota's office.** Spota is Morris' longtime friend and was his defense attorney when Spota's predecessor as Suffolk district attorney brought charges against Morris in 2000.

Spota's \$25,000 payment is included in documents the district attorney's office is required to submit to the U.S. Department of Justice, which tracks how local law enforcement manages money and other assets seized from criminals. The DOJ released those records to the public for the first time late last year.

Months before that release, Newsday published a story on Long Island's major county law enforcement agencies and their asset forfeiture programs. Spota's office was the only one that declined to disclose any information.

Morris said the donation from the district attorney's asset forfeiture fund came after he pitched Spota on an idea for a video about bullying and violence in schools.

Set on Patchogue streets and in school hallways, the \$25,000 video featured roughly 20 child actors and cameos by retired New York Mets shortstop Buddy Harrelson and retired Jets tackle Marty Lyons, both Suffolk Sports Hall of Fame inductees, Morris said.

**Morris did not include the \$25,000 from Spota in the documents he is required to file, he said, because the Hall never really received the money.** Spota actually paid the film company that produced the video, Morris said.

Spota declined to be interviewed for this story. In an emailed statement, he wrote that Newsday's inquiry was "based on a false premise since the facts are quite simply that Mr. Morris did not receive public funds from the District Attorney's office."

Instead, Spota said the payment had gone directly to a vendor, in support of the Hall. Spota's office did not respond to Newsday's request for a copy of the check to the vendor.

Harry Oates, the president of GVP Digital Media, which produced the film for the Hall, did not respond to a phone message seeking comment.

The money for Morris' anti-bullying video was the fourth-largest amount given that year to "Community-based Programs," the record shows. The payment exceeded the amount the district attorney's office spent from the asset forfeiture fund that year to support some other programs, including \$10,000 for the Suffolk County Coalition Against Domestic Violence and \$1,496.92 for the Child Advocacy Center.

In his emailed statement, Spota wrote, "not-for-profit agencies make their own requests for support from the District Attorney's Office."

The anti-bullying film's director, Marc Harwood, said that the plan was for DVDs to be distributed to local schools.

"Eddie wanted to have a big press rollout, but I don't know if that happened," Harwood said. The 18-minute film -- "Bullying & Violence in Our Schools" -- is available on YouTube. Though Spota does not appear in the film online, he is thanked in the credits.

Current Suffolk Sheriff Vincent DeMarco, who also controls an asset forfeiture fund, said Morris contacted him in 2012 or 2013 seeking money to make a similar film.

DeMarco said he decided to not get involved in helping the project because state law prohibits elected government officials and candidates from appearing in advertisements -- including public service announcements -- made with public funds.

### **Felon executive director**

When eight "founding fathers" hatched the concept of a Suffolk County Sports Hall of Fame around 1990, the idea was to pay homage not just to superstars such as Southampton-born Carl Yastrzemski but unheralded mentors like Marge Auster, who coached several sports at Southampton High without being paid. The organization has met that goal by routinely inducting high school coaches, athletic directors and sportswriters (including current or past Newsday staffers Bob Herzog, Gregg Sarra, Charles H. Clark and Jim Barbanell, according to the Hall's website).

"It would notice those people who normally go unnoticed," said co-founder McAteer. "And that was frankly what made it interesting to me."

But honoring people who don't all have name recognition poses a fundraising challenge, according to Waldbauer.

"It didn't have that broad appeal that some charities have where people open their wallets and give them money," Waldbauer said.

What the Hall did have was Morris, a consummate fundraiser with political clout and connections.

He became full-time executive director of the nonprofit in 1999, having retired from the sheriff's office -- where he had worked since he was 21 -- six months before he was **indicted on 89 criminal counts in which he was charged with fostering widespread corruption at the county jail.**

**His boss, then-Sheriff Patrick Mahoney, faced 55 counts. The lawmen were accused of using the jail as a campaign headquarters, taking bribes, falsifying business records and even directing the use of prison labor at the Hall.**

Morris explained recently that the latter charge was a result of him asking Mahoney to have inmates paint the organization's new museum space in Patchogue. Morris maintained it may have been a "stupid decision," but he did not consider it illegal.

Morris said that he was prosecuted because he "got caught in a battle between my boss and [then-district attorney James] Catterson."

Nonetheless, with Spota as his attorney, he pleaded guilty to the felony of defrauding the government and the misdemeanors of theft of services, using the jail for improper political activities and offering a false instrument for filings. He was sentenced to community service and ordered to pay a \$10,000 fine.

Morris' initial salary at the Hall was \$54,500, pay he earned by landing a free home for the organization and then a taxpayer-funded windfall to spruce it up.

Morris, in the late '90s, approached then-Brookhaven Town Supervisor Felix Grucci in his search for a property he could use as a museum. **Grucci connected Morris with John Kanas, then the CEO of North Fork Bank, who agreed to donate a large annex of bank-owned property on South Ocean Avenue in Patchogue.**

**Kanas, now CEO of Florida-based BankUnited, declined to be interviewed for this story.**

**Current Supervisor has made this bank an Islip Town taxpayer money depository!**

The annex included a 7,100-square-foot historical white marble bank building, a 6,400-square-foot storefront and a smaller commercial space that has long been home to a sausage shop. In tax filings soon after, the Hall valued property in its possession at \$810,813.

### **More public money**

It would be nearly a decade until the Hall's museum opened in Patchogue. In the meantime, Morris and other backers used political connections to score taxpayer-funded grants to renovate the museum space.



**Carpenter  
donator**

After Morris applied for a grant from the Dormitory Authority of the State of New York in 2002, the agency gave the Hall \$250,000. The application for that grant, signed by Morris, said the Hall would serve as a "center that will educate today's students and adults about the cultural, historical and human contributions and achievements of its honorees in the world of athletics."

The application revealed an ambitious, multiphase plan for a main museum, a gift shop and a "Sports Research Center" where high school and college students and school officials could access a free library when writing term papers or otherwise in need of "sports information."

An invoice later submitted to the Dormitory Authority showed large amounts spent on elaborate museum displays. They included \$16,200 alone on the golf area, which consisted of an interactive Wii video game setup, a "golf club display" and several graphics and plaques for that sport's inductees.

According to Morris, the Dormitory Authority grant was pushed through by then-Legis. Brian Foley (D-Blue Point), who would also serve stints as Brookhaven Town Supervisor and as a state senator. "I know his father and his mother," Morris said of Foley, whose father, John J. Foley, was a founding member of the Hall. "What can I say, I've been around for a long time."

Brian Foley, who is now retired from politics, declined to comment on whether he had helped the Hall get the grant but said "in my years in office the Suffolk Sports Hall of Fame was an outstanding organization."

According to the Hall's tax filings, it received \$201,184 in the fiscal year ending February 2006 from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development for building renovations. Morris credits then-Rep. Tim Bishop (D-Southampton) for that grant.

Bishop did not respond to messages seeking comment.

In 2005, the Hall received \$20,000 from a Suffolk County omnibus grant, which was added by the county legislature, budget records show. In 2006, the legislature appropriated \$32,500 for the Hall. And from 2003 through 2007, it received four grants totaling \$50,000 from the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation for "ongoing renovations" to the Hall's museum.

Assemb. Michael Fitzpatrick (R-St. James) said the parks grants were "member items" he sponsored for the Hall, where he had previously been a trustee. He called steering public funds to the organization a "worthwhile effort" but acknowledged that after he helped the Hall receive parks grants, "the momentum kind of stalled and at that time I didn't know why."

Besides grants, records show the Hall has also had assistance from political campaigns. Since 2000, the organization has received at least \$33,530 in donations or in-kind assistance from the campaigns of elected officials, including: \$3,360 from late Legis. William J. Lindsay; \$2,225 from then-Suffolk Comptroller Joe Sawicki; **\$1,600 from then-Suffolk treasurer and current Islip Town Supervisor Angie Carpenter**; and \$1,100 from late state Sen. Caesar Trunzo. DeMarco's campaign gave \$900 in 2012, which the sheriff said paid for a foursome of golf at a Hall event.

**Sawicki and Carpenter did not respond to calls for comment.**

Spota's campaign fund has donated \$7,625, more than any other elected official.

At the height of financial windfalls, the Hall declared in tax filings for the fiscal year ending in February 2006 that it had received more than \$400,000 in federal, state and local government grants. Morris personally received steady raises and other financial benefits.

His highest disclosed salary, according to the filings, came in 2007 when he received \$75,481. The only other person shown to be receiving a salary from the Hall is its





secretary, Nancy Lee Hines, who Morris said was an old friend and whose own pay topped out at under \$38,000 in 2006.

Hines did not respond to a phone message seeking comment.

### **Museum opens, closes**

The Suffolk Sports Hall of Fame Museum finally opened in Patchogue in 2008. Morris partly blames the nation's financial downturn for ultimately dooming the museum. He described downtown Patchogue as virtually abandoned and said there were "all kinds of homeless and crap going on there." Morris estimated that on some days the museum attracted between eight and 10 visitors.

Court and property records show that even before the museum opened in Patchogue, the Hall had begun selling off portions of the bank property it had been given.

In 2007, the organization sold the historic bank building for \$865,000. The next year, it received \$221,190 for the pork store. And in 2013, the organization sold the parcel that had housed its museum for \$600,000. Morris said he moved memorabilia, like an Esiason jersey and helmet, into storage.

In records explaining the 2013 sale, the Hall stated it "finds itself in a predicament in which it can no longer raise the amount of funds necessary to operate the museum on a daily basis" and "has been operating financially in the 'red' for the past four years and accumulating debt each year."

This spring, the Hall sold the last remnant of the annex, the bank's former drive-through, which the Village of Patchogue purchased for \$94,000 to pave 40 municipal parking spots.

Only five years after opening, the Suffolk Sports Hall of Fame had closed the museum in Patchogue for good, devoting itself to "off-site exhibits." The combined sales of the Patchogue properties it had received as a donation brought the organization \$1.78 million.

Former Brookhaven Supervisor Grucci, who has since retired after a stint in the U.S. Congress, said he was surprised to learn that Morris had engineered the parcel-by-parcel sale of the property Grucci helped him obtain.

"At the time there was no indication that they had an interest in acquiring this building, splitting it up and selling off the pieces," Grucci said. "Obviously, I wouldn't have had any interest in that. I had an interest in offering housing for a place to honor athletes."

**Morris said he's proud of the off-site existence at MacArthur Airport, which he calls a "Plan B." Morris unveiled the airport display in May 2014, with more assistance from officials in securing the space -- which is operated by the Town of Islip** -- for free. He said the organization spent \$36,000 to create the display at the airport, where a plaque honors late Hall co-founder "Butch" Dellecave and photos depict a collection of Islip standouts.

Morris boasted that 1.2 million people pass through that terminal every year, and since many of those people are waiting for flights, "you almost have them captive."

## Help for the Suffolk Hall of Fame

Updated July 25, 2015 8:06 PM

The Suffolk County Sports Hall of Fame has struggled to get financial support from Long Island's residents, but **local politicians have been willing to use taxpayer dollars to support the nonprofit run by Edward Morris Sr.:**

A lease at a county-owned country club, which Bellone helped arrange, shows the Hall pays \$500 per month for more than 850 square feet of office and

storage space. Bellone also helped secure free future exhibit space in at least two other county-owned facilities.

District Attorney Thomas Spota

Morris' former defense attorney used \$25,000 in asset forfeiture money to fund an anti-bullying video Morris requested. Spota has also donated \$7,625 from his campaign fund, more than any other elected official.

Then-Legis. Brian Foley (D-Blue Point)

Helped secure a \$250,000 Dormitory Authority of the State of New York grant in 2002, Morris said.

Then-Rep.

Tim Bishop (D-

Southampton)

Morris said Bishop helped him get the \$201,184 grant from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development in 2005-2006 for building renovations.

Suffolk County Legislature

Lawmakers gave the Hall a \$20,000 omnibus grant in 2005 and appropriated another \$32,500 for the organization in 2006.

Assemb. Michael Fitzpatrick

(R-St. James)

Said he sponsored member items resulting in four grants totaling \$50,000 from the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation for "ongoing renovations" to the museum.

**Town of Islip**



**Morris said the space for the Hall's exhibit at MacArthur Airport, a public facility, was given free of charge.**



## Letters: Sports Hall of Fame a 'squander'

July 30, 2015 5:11 PM

Thank you, Newsday, for answering my husband's question, "What happened to the Suffolk Sports Hall of Fame" ["\$1.38M on an airport wall," News, July 26]?

We visited this small, pleasant venue in Patchogue in 2012 and enjoyed the quiet celebration of Long Island's sports greats. When we went back, it was gone!

Now we know the disappearance was part of a larger story about yet another squandering of public funds.

One more thing: The people behind the hall of fame also made an anti-bullying video, at a cost of \$25,000. Where may I view it?

*Jacqueline Clark, Islip*

It's difficult for any Suffolk County taxpayer to have confidence in our political system after reading about the Suffolk County Sports Hall of Fame.



Former Suffolk County undersheriff Edward Morris, who in 2001 pleaded guilty to a felony, defrauding the government, was able to retain his \$75,000-plus pension.



He received a generous salary and expenses for his job as the executive director of the sports hall of fame. Through apparent political connections, the hall of fame was able to secure the donation of several buildings in Patchogue and hundreds of thousands in Suffolk County, New York State and federal funds.

Thereafter, the hall of fame became essentially semi-homeless, with some very limited collections being exhibited at the Long Island MacArthur Airport. **What happened to the bulk of these funds?** To paraphrase William Shakespeare, something is rotten in Suffolk County.

## Making Suffolk's Sports Hall of Fame more visible

Updated July 29, 2015 8:49 PM



**It makes no sense to funnel at least \$1.38 million in public money into a nonprofit sports museum honoring Suffolk athletes -- and then make it accessible only to airport passengers who've cleared security.**

Yet that's the situation with the Suffolk Sports Hall of Fame, located at gates A3 and A4 at Long Island MacArthur Airport, which puts it out of reach of prospective visitors without airline tickets.

A Newsday investigation raised questions about the Hall of Fame, its executive director, Edward Morris Sr., and his ties to some Suffolk elected officials. But one overarching issue is that the Hall, established in 1990, has received little public financial support and, with that, dwindling interest.

A donor once gave the Hall a building -- in Patchogue, whose popular downtown is now booming -- but Morris told Newsday that he had to sell it, for \$1.8 million, to keep the Hall going.

And while Morris said that the Hall still has almost \$800,000 in assets, its visibility continues to shrink.

That's not Suffolk County's problem.

It's Morris' job, not the government's, to build the Hall's donor base, attract supporters and increase visibility.

But since more than a million bucks of public funding -- through assistance from County Executive Steve Bellone, District Attorney Thomas Spota and other elected officials -- already has been invested in the Hall, there's got to be a way for residents to see what their money bought.

At the town-owned airport, Newsday reported, Morris has arranged oversized photographs of local sports figures, including retired NFL quarterback Boomer Esiason of West Islip; former pro wrestler Mick Foley, who grew up in East Setauket; boxing champion Buddy McGirt of Brentwood; and wrestler and coach Jumper Leggio of Bay Shore.

Let's pause here for a confession: I had to look up all but one of the above, and ended up being impressed by the quantity and caliber of athletes Suffolk turned out -- just like a colleague and former local high school football player from our sports department was saying last week as we scoured through yellowed Newsday sports pages from the 1940s: "Dude, you were so right about Brentwood, Bay Shore and West Islip being powerhouses."



All of which means that maybe, just maybe, there's something to having a curated collection of Suffolk sports greats. Is Morris' Hall of Fame the way to go? Given its problems generating financial help and support, can -- and should -- it survive?

Financially challenged Suffolk would do well to hold back on precious public funding until the not-for-profit does the work it needs. Besides, with the amount Morris said the Hall still has in the bank, the group has plentiful seed money of its own.

Some of which ought to go toward making the displays more accessible to the public.

Wednesday, a spokesman for Bellone said the county has had discussions with Morris about moving some exhibits from the airport to county-owned land, such as Bethpage Ballpark in Central Islip.

"If we can come to an arrangement with the group, as we would for other not-for-profits, we may be able to do something," a Bellone spokesman said. The combination of funding from the Hall, along with nonfinancial help from the county, ought to help make that possible.