

Arts group to offer health coverage

By **Colin Dabkowski**

NEWS ARTS CRITIC

Published: March 16, 2012, 10:52 AM

When the troubled Arts Council in Buffalo and Erie County went out of business in 2010, so did its popular group health insurance plan that provided affordable coverage for hundreds of area artists and cultural workers.

But thanks to a deal struck this week between the newly formed Arts Services Initiative and the Amherst Chamber of Commerce, members of the region's cultural community will once again be able to participate in a group health insurance plan.

"It's very difficult to access good health care. The costs are high if you try to come in on your own. Health care was one of the critical services with Arts Council," said Tod A. Kniazuk, the first executive director of the Arts Services Initiative. "Literally within a day of my appointment being announced, I had people asking me, 'Are we getting health insurance back?' It really was a need that was out there that was pretty pressing."

Kniazuk stressed that any local musician, actor, dancer, arts administrator, whether full- or part-time, is eligible for the plan, which officially becomes available April 1. Participants will be offered a choice of five plans from BlueCross BlueShield, Independent Health and Univera Healthcare.

"The economy has had an adverse impact on the creative class and their ability to prosper due to less discretionary spending by their customers," Colleen DiPirro, the president and chief executive officer of the Amherst Chamber of Commerce, said.

Nadine Catalano, an Orchard Park resident and sometime artist who was enrolled in the Arts Council's plan until the organization dissolved, welcomed the announcement.

"At the time, it was so disconcerting to be told, after the fact, that a few months prior, the [Arts Council] insurance had been stopped because they didn't pay the bills," Catalano said.

"[Individual] health insurance is \$1,200 a month. It's extremely expensive, and to be able to go together as a group, that's a wonderful thing."

The Arts Services Initiative, an outgrowth of many years of planning by local foundations and members of the cultural community, aims to strengthen the position of arts organizations in Western New York and to integrate the arts into the growth of the regional economy. In the process, it is also picking up many of the former responsibilities of the Arts Council, whose dissolution left the arts community without a central resource for group health insurance and the distribution of New York State grant money, among other vital services.

"This partnership with the Amherst Chamber of Commerce gets the cultural workers the health care coverage they need, and also serves as a prime example of the kinds of connections with the business sector and regional leaders that ASI is working to forge," Kniazuk said in a statement.

Artists and cultural workers can find out more about the plan by contacting Christian Solecki at csoleki@amherst.org or 250-4206.

cdabkowski@buffnews.com