

Arts Service Initiative offers health benefits

Business First by Tracey Drury, Buffalo Business First Reporter



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A deal through the Amherst Chamber of Commerce will make health benefits available to the arts community.

More than 1,000 artists and cultural workers will gain access to health insurance programs through a new agreement between the Arts Services Initiative of WNY and the [Amherst Chamber of Commerce](#) .

The partnership provides group health insurance, effective April 1, for cultural organizations and their employees, as well as individual artists, actors, tech workers, arts administrators, musicians and others working in the field in Western New York.

The chamber provided complimentary membership to the ASI, which in turn enables access to the health insurance programs provided through the chamber's in-house insurance agency, staffed by a licensed broker. Individuals will have access to five plans from BlueCross BlueShield of WNY, [Independent Health](#) and [Univera Healthcare](#) , with options for single or family coverage and a range of coverage options. New members will be enrolled monthly.

[Tod Kniazuk](#), ASI executive director, says health insurance remains tough to come by in the cultural sector.

“Trying to find good coverage and competitive rates as an individual or small organization is incredibly difficult,” he says.

Health insurance through the partnership will be available to employees at arts and cultural groups, as well as anyone working in the arts or music who can show they might qualify, even if they're working part-time or full-time elsewhere.

“We know the cultural sector is made up largely of part-time employees, independent contractors and folks who need to do multiple things,” Kniazuk says. “That’s the reality of it: A lot of the musicians and the best bands in Buffalo have day jobs. We really didn’t want to be limiting about it.”

Through informal surveys and emails, ASI estimates there are at least 1,000 individuals in the arts and cultural sector without health care, including hundreds who previously were covered through the defunct Arts Council in Buffalo and Erie County. When Kniazuk was hired after the creation of ASI last year, he says he almost immediately began hearing from individuals from the 300 nonprofit cultural organizations in Erie, Niagara and Chautauqua counties affiliated with the ASI, many asking how it could help provide health insurance.

“That’s not even including all the individual artists and actors,” he says.

The creation of the ASI brought together the work of several existing groups, including Advancing Arts and Culture, Arts Partners for Learning, Young Audiences of WNY and the Greater Buffalo Cultural Alliance, which serves as the advocacy and awareness arm of the group. In addition to growing capacity, advocacy and collaboratives among nonprofit cultural groups, the ASI is working to develop partnerships and collaborations with the business sector. The partnership with the Amherst Chamber is a great example of that, Kniazuk says.

“I love it when you can accomplish a primary goal but also have a secondary benefit,” he says. “The primary goal is we’re getting folks health insurance — which is huge. The secondary benefit is we’ve also forged a partnership between the cultural sector and one of the largest chambers in the region.”