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Center *for an*  
Urban  
Future

**MOHAWK VALLEY'S**  
**CREATIVE**  
**SPARK**

# Center *for an* Urban Future

**MOHAWK VALLEY'S CREATIVE SPARK** is a publication of the Center for an Urban Future. Researched and written by Rachel Neches, Eli Dvorkin, and Sarah Amandolare. Edited by Dorian Block. Additional research by Alejandra Díaz-Pizarro, Udonne Eke-Okoro Rebecca Ortiz, Nora Lewis, Yona Litwin and Samuel Weidman. Designed by Stislow Design.

**Center for an Urban Future (CUF)** is a leading think tank focused on building a stronger and more equitable economy in New York City, and expanding economic opportunity for all New Yorkers.

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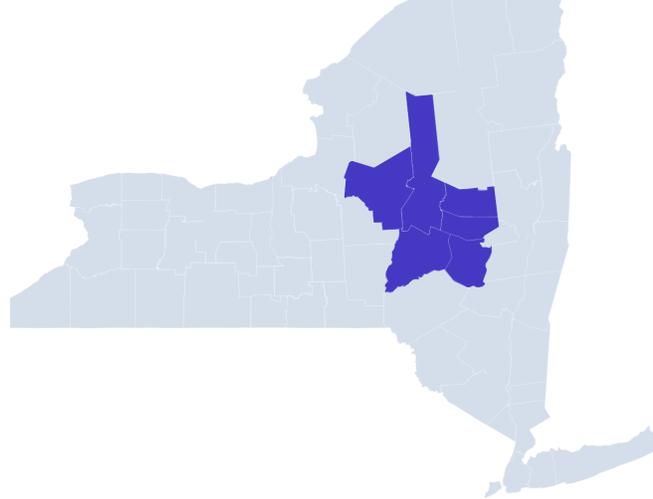
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# Regional Arts Profile

## Mohawk Valley



**IN DOWNTOWN UTICA, A RENOWNED INTERNATIONAL** artist residency program sits at the edge of Oriskany Street, where the paved-over Erie Canal once flowed.

“We’ve had about 675 artists come to Utica, an Upstate Rust Belt city, from all over the world,” says Tom Montan, executive director of Sculpture Space, which hosts 20 artists per year for two-month residencies. The facility, which occupies a former boiler manufacturing plant, has attracted sculptors from Egypt, China, Iran, Mexico, and beyond over the past five decades. “Not only does that infuse Utica with some talented folks who have to eat and entertain themselves, so money is flowing into the community, but they become ambassadors for Upstate New York to the world,” says Montan.

Utica is the largest of the Mohawk Valley’s small cities and rural towns tucked between the Adirondack and Catskill Mountains. The city and region’s growing reputation as a cultural center and tourist destination is paying off. Within New York state, the Mohawk Valley was second only to New York City in direct revenue from tourism in 2024.<sup>1</sup> That year, Oneida County, home to Utica, generated \$3.7 billion—74 percent of the region’s \$4.5 billion in tourism spending.<sup>2</sup> Substantial Regional Economic Development Councils (REDC) investments, including support for cultural and historic sites, have been critical to the growth of tourism in the region.

Even when artists financially struggle and cultural groups have lost public funding, they have also proven essential to making cities and towns attractive to visitors. Nearly 60 percent of attendees to the summer exhibition at Munson Museum of Art in downtown Utica, for instance, come from outside Oneida County, according to president and CEO Anna Tobin D’Ambrosio. And increasingly, municipalities across the Mohawk Valley are recognizing that creative energy drives tourism.

“I’ve noticed Fulton County starting to shift focus towards tourism as a major potential for the area, utilizing arts and culture as the attraction point for the tourism,” says Kyle

Barrett Price, a cellist and composer who founded the Caroga Arts Collective, a Fulton County music performance and residency venue, in 2017.

While overall employment in the region fell 3.8 percent over the past decade, the Mohawk Valley’s arts and culture sector grew 15.6 percent.<sup>3</sup> Munson, a Utica institution that includes the Munson Museum of Art and Pratt Munson College of Art and Design, employs about 200 people. Grass-roots organizations are expanding too. 4 Elements Studio in downtown Utica, founded by Armenian ceramic artist Vartan Poghosian, hired five full-time employees in 2024. Poghosian says that the growing arts scene has translated into more foot traffic downtown and a shift in atmosphere. “Arts and culture is changing the city—a complete renaissance,” Poghosian says. “Every time we have an opening or I visit another organization’s show, I see new families, immigrants, and refugees coming out.”

Refugees comprise roughly a quarter of Utica’s population, and more than 40 languages are spoken in the city’s school district.<sup>4</sup> The Mohawk and Oneida nations of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy have ancestral roots here. But only recently has the arts and cultural sector come to represent the region’s full cultural richness. “Having lived here for 35 years, I’ve really seen a change,” says D’Ambrosio. “The arts were seen as unattainable to some people in our community. That has dramatically shifted over the past decade and even more so in the last five years.”

Artists and organizations are helping to tell the region’s multicultural story. Oneida Wolf Clan member Danielle Schenandoah exhibited her beadwork at the Munson Museum of Art in 2024 and now serves as a liaison to local Oneida and Mohawk communities. Since becoming executive director of Kirkland Art Center in 2023, painter Anita Welych has prioritized showcasing diverse voices, including a 2024 performance by Malian master kora musician Yacouba Sissoko. Filmmaker Raienkonnis Edwards, of the Akwesasne

Mohawk Nation, recently collaborated with the Kanatsiohareke Mohawk Community to document oral histories of Haudenosaunee traditional teachers.

Cultural organizations are also expanding arts education for people of all backgrounds and abilities. Last year, the Caroga Arts Collective began providing string music lessons in the Gloversville and Johnstown school districts, where those instruments are not taught. For the third summer running, Munson Museum of Art provided free art classes for about 350 children from downtown Utica, including activities that engage with the museum's permanent collection of fine art. And in 2024, Poghosian secured funding to purchase the historic downtown Utica building that houses 4 Elements Studio, which is expanding its lineup of creative workshops, especially for people with disabilities.

State funding has been essential to sustaining this growth. Kirkland Art Center received a \$1.9 million Downtown Revitalization Initiative grant to rebuild a barn for children's and visual arts programming, create a culinary arts studio, and stabilize its 1842 church facility; an additional \$50,000 New York State Council on the Arts (NYSCA) grant will also help replace its damaged dance floor. The Munson Museum of Art is seeking NYSCA support to update the museum's 1960s-era restrooms and make its family gallery multilingual. And thanks to state funding, for the first time in decades, Sculpture Space was able to grant artists stipends for their residences. "That wouldn't have been possible without NYSCA," says Montan. "We rely very much on our state funding, which is generally about a third of our budget every year."

NYSCA is by far the most important source of funding for Mohawk Valley arts and cultural organizations, providing \$1.4 million in FY 2025, but funding has failed to keep pace: in FY 2000, NYSCA funding to Mohawk Valley totaled \$1.8 million after adjusting for inflation, about 22 percent higher than today. Cities and towns also often lack the resources for robust, sustainable investment in the arts. While the city of Utica has invested in public art in recent years, it lacks an arts budget. And demand for NYSCA funding is already exceeding supply, as the number of artists living in the region balloons. Even while the population of the Mohawk Valley fell 2.5 percent from 2014 to 2024, its resident artist and design workers grew 57.9 percent, from 641 to 1,012.

Moreover, funding from the National Endowment for the

Arts (NEA) to the Mohawk Valley disappeared completely in FY 2025, one of two New York regions to receive no funding at all. Munson had been working on a program with nearby Hamilton College until their NEA grant was cancelled in March, and previous federal grants enabled important programs. "With an IMLS (Institute of Museum and Library Services) grant, we were able to digitize our collection. With an NEA grant, we were able to work with The Refugee Center on English language learner programs and an exhibition," says D'Ambrosio.

And this year, no Downtown Revitalization Initiative grants were directed towards arts and culture projects.

In 2026, there was some increased support with five of the area's Regional Economic Development grants going toward arts and culture projects. The largest of these is a \$1 million grant to the Caroga Arts Collective Inc. which is transforming the former Sherman's Park into an outdoor performance venue and tourist destination, including an 1,800-seat amphitheater and an artists' residence lodge on Caroga Lake.

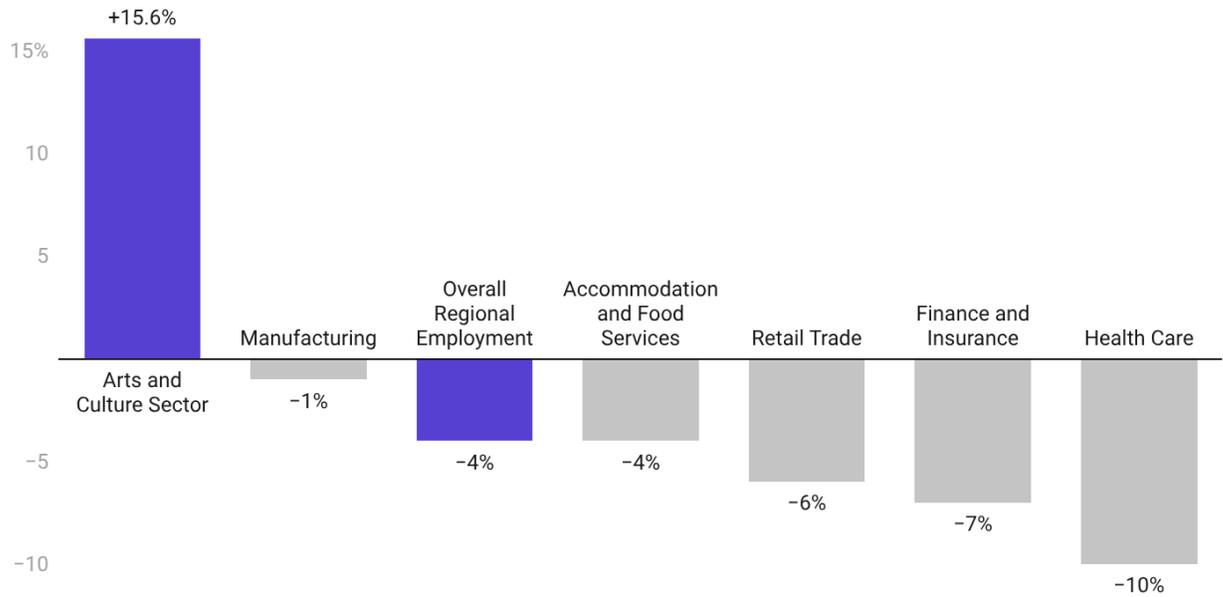
Without sustained funding, it will be harder for artists to live and work in the Mohawk Valley, threatening the economic progress spurred by their presence. Small businesses and arts organizations have been collaboratively "taking flight" in the Fulton County cities of Gloversville—awarded a Downtown Revitalization Initiative grant in 2022—and Johnstown, according to Price. Some of those businesses, such as Stump City Brewing, pop up as vendors at Caroga Arts Collective's summer festival, "utilizing the events to bring awareness to their products," says Price. "People are trying to create a little ecosystem around the arts."

The same arts-driven ecosystem has taken root in downtown Utica, where a hard-earned vibrancy hangs in the balance. Munson worked closely with Minneapolis developer Art Space to assess demand for artist spaces in Utica, resulting in the development of 43 affordable live-work units opening this summer. Often, Sculpture Space and 4 Elements Studio hold openings on the same night that the Broadway Theatre League of Utica is putting on a show. "People go from one place to another, and in between, stop at the cafes, which is so exciting for a place like Utica that was dormant for so long," Poghosian, the founder of 4 Elements, says. "Now, it's a completely different story. You feel the heart of this city."

1. Mohawk Valley Regional Economic Development Council, *2024 Annual Report: Mohawk Valley Region* (Albany: New York State Regional Economic Development Councils, 2024), <https://regionalcouncils.ny.gov/sites/default/files/2024-12/MVREDC%202024%20Final%2011-15.pdf>.
2. Empire State Development, *Economic Impact of Visitors in New York: Central New York Region, 2023* (Albany: Empire State Development, 2023), <https://esd.ny.gov/sites/default/files/media/document/Central-New-York-New-York-Tourism-Economic-Impact-2023.pdf>.
3. Center for an Urban Future analysis of data from Lightcast.
4. The Center, Utica, "Foreign Born Populations," accessed March 6, 2026, <https://www.thecenterutica.org/community-resources/economic-impact/populations/>

## The arts and culture sector in the Mohawk Valley is growing, while overall employment is down

Change in jobs, 2014 to 2024 (%)

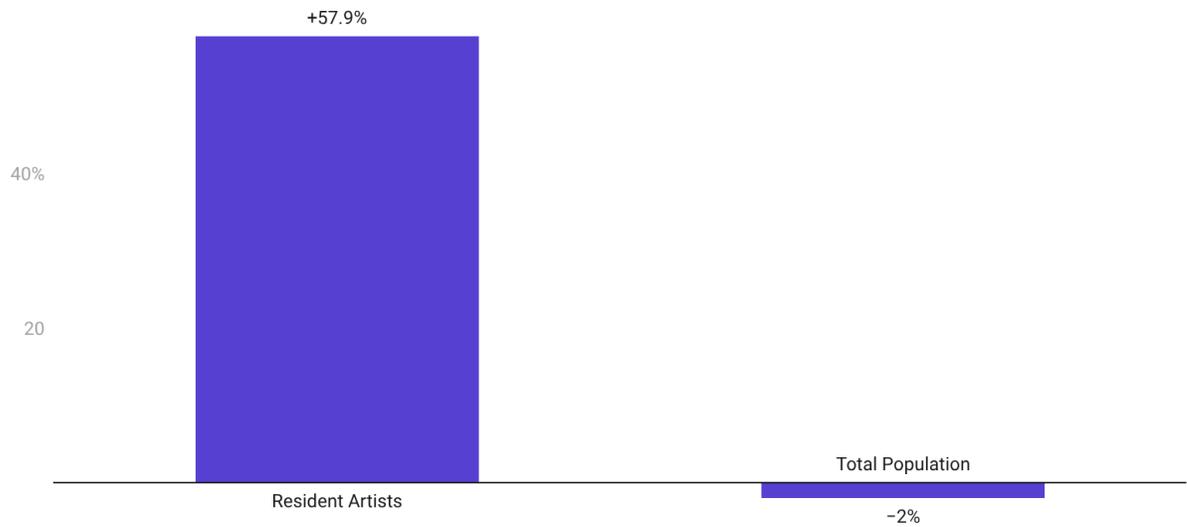


Arts and culture sector totaled 1,372 jobs in 2024

Source: Center for an Urban Future analysis of data from Lightcast. Accessed October 28th, 2025 • Created with Datawrapper

## The Mohawk Valley's resident artist population flourishes, while the total population stagnates

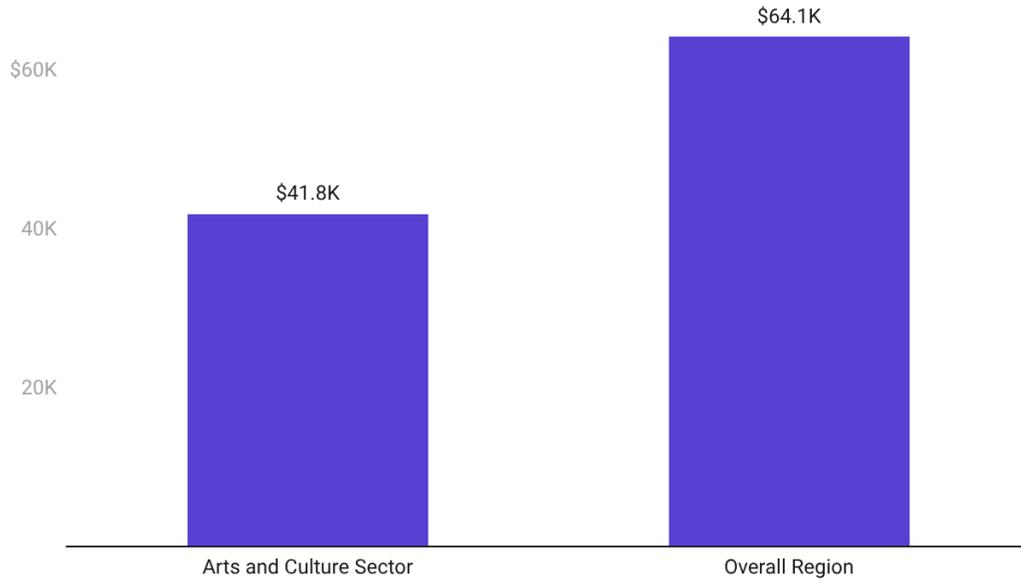
Change in population, 2014 to 2024 (%)



Resident artist population totaled 1,012 in 2024.

Source: Center for an Urban Future analysis of data from Lightcast. Accessed October 28th, 2025 • Created with Datawrapper

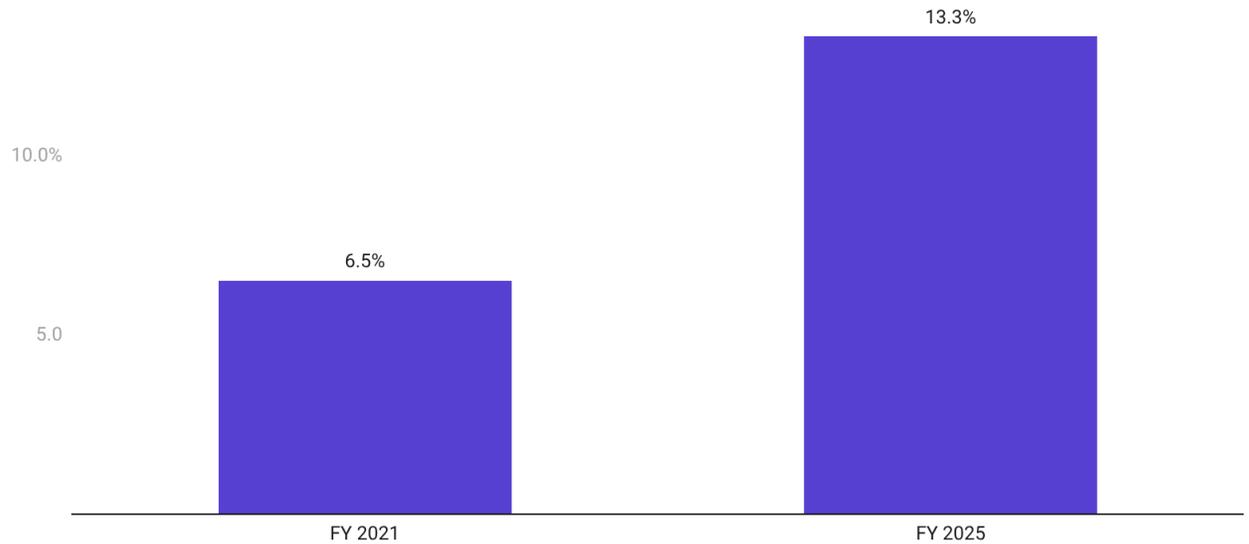
### In the Mohawk Valley, arts and culture workers earn less than the private-sector average annual wage



Source: Center for an Urban Future analysis of data from Lightcast. • Created with Datawrapper

### More of Mohawk Valley's Regional Economic Development Council (REDC) funding is going to arts and culture-related projects

Share of total REDC funding going to arts and culture-related projects, Round 11 (FY 2021) to Round 15 (FY 2025)

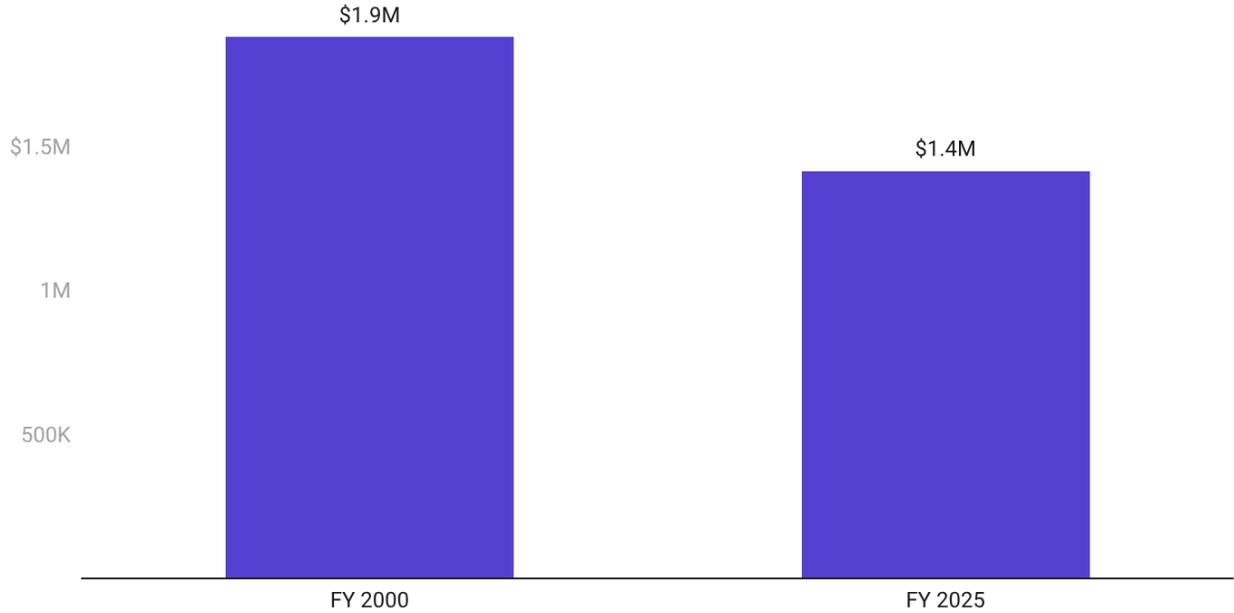


Total funding to arts and culture-related projects increased from \$1.9 million in FY 2021 to \$3.1 million in FY 2025

Source: Center for an Urban Future analysis of data from Round 11 and Round 15 Regional Economic Development Council (REDC) Awards • Created with Datawrapper

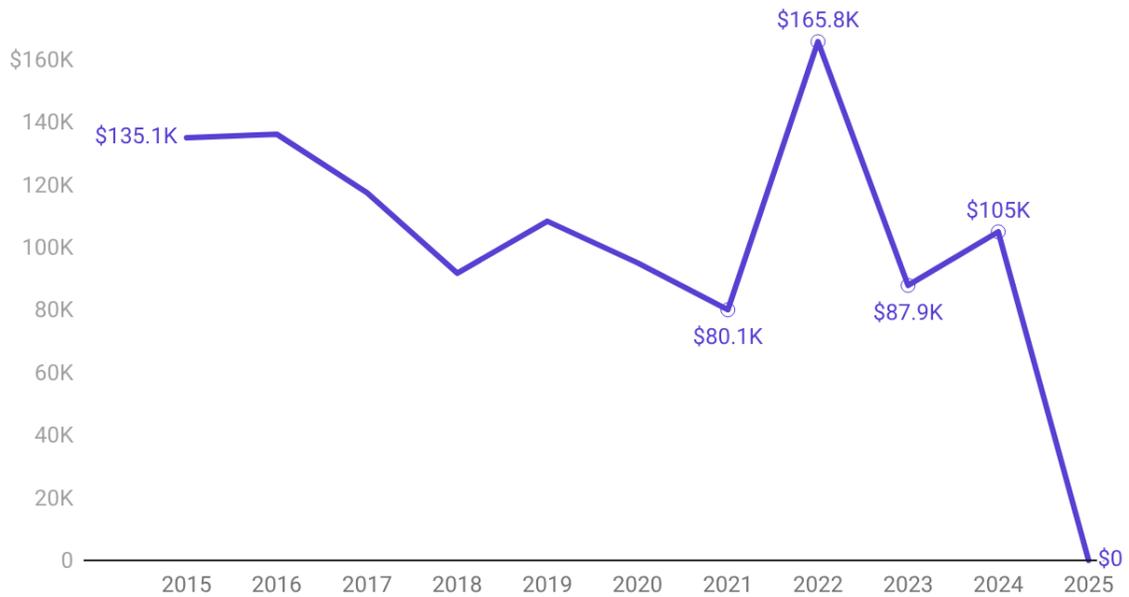
## New York State Council on the Arts (NYSCA) operating grant funding to the Mohawk Valley has declined

After adjusting for inflation, FY 2025 NYSCA funding to the Mohawk Valley is a third lower than in FY 2000



Source: Center for an Urban Future analysis of data from the New York State Council on the Arts, available from [https://www.nysca.org/grant\\_app/org\\_search.cfm](https://www.nysca.org/grant_app/org_search.cfm) • Created with Datawrapper

## National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) funding to Mohawk Valley disappears completely in FY 2025

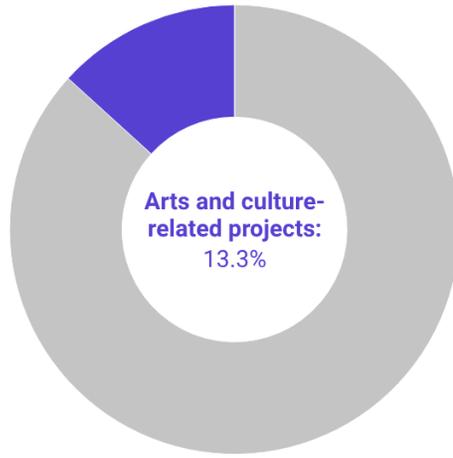


Historical awards are inflation-adjusted to FY 2024

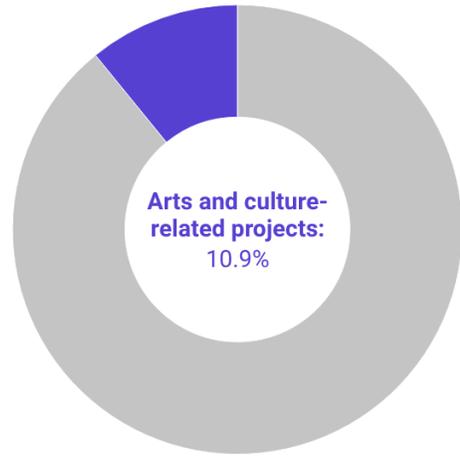
Source: Center for an Urban Future analysis of the data from the National Endowment for the Arts Online Grant Search, available from <https://grantsearch.nea.gov/> • Created with Datawrapper

## In the Mohawk Valley, 13.3 percent of FY 2025 REDC funding was directed towards arts and culture projects

■ Other projects ■ Arts and culture-related projects



Mohawk Valley



New York State

Source: Center for an Urban Future analysis of data from the Round 15 Regional Economic Development Council (REDC) Awards • Created with Datawrapper

# Recommendations

**1. PROVIDE RELIABLE, INFLATION-ADJUSTED FUNDING FOR THE ARTS.** New York's arts sector is playing a growing role in driving economic vitality across communities statewide, but public funding has not kept pace with rising costs or the sector's expanding impact. When NYSCA was at its peak in 1990, it provided the equivalent of \$133.4 million in operating support, adjusted for inflation; in FY 2026, that figure was just \$84 million. Recent budget proposals would move funding in the wrong direction, underscoring the need for a more stable and predictable approach. The state should commit to increasing annual aid to localities to \$150 million, indexed to inflation going forward, while sustaining capital funding at \$80 million annually. Without reliable operating support, the state risks weakening one of its most effective engines of regional growth.

**2. INTEGRATE THE ARTS ACROSS THE STATE'S ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND POLICY AGENDA.** Despite its growing impact, the arts sector still represents a small share of the state's broader economic development strategy. New York should make the arts a core pillar of its approach to inclusive growth—ensuring the sector has a seat at the table in regional planning and investment decisions and expanding the share of arts-focused projects within REDC and Downtown Revitalization Initiative funding. State agencies should also incorporate arts-based strategies into their core work. This could include engaging artists to support community outreach around major transportation and infrastructure projects, partnering with artists to design and deliver public health campaigns, and expanding technical assistance for affordable housing developments that include artist preference units and live-work space. Embedding these approaches across agencies will help reduce costs, improve program effectiveness, and expand opportunity across the arts ecosystem.

**3. LAUNCH A PORTABLE BENEFITS PILOT FOR FREELANCERS AND SELF-EMPLOYED ARTISTS.** The number of independent artists, writers, and performers in New York State has grown rapidly, yet most lack access to basic safety nets such as health insurance, paid leave, retirement savings, and unemployment protections. This is especially challenging given the intermittent nature of creative work and the volatility of income in the sector. The state should pilot a portable benefits system that allows workers to accrue and retain benefits as they move between gigs, employers, and sectors. Benefits should follow the worker—not the job—and be designed to minimize administrative burden while maximizing access. Expanding access to benefits would help stabilize creative careers and retain artists across New York's regions.

**4. TAKE ARTIST-IN-RESIDENCE PROGRAMS TO THE NEXT LEVEL.** The state's recent launch of a statewide artist-in-residence initiative was an important and long-overdue step—the first time New York has embedded artists within state agencies at scale. Now is the time to build on that progress by expanding the model significantly. With leadership from the governor, New York should extend artist-in-residence programs across additional state agencies and into county and local governments, while also partnering with schools, community-based organizations, and cultural institutions to create a broader statewide network. Public-private partnerships can help fund and scale this expansion, bringing in philanthropic and institutional partners to support placements and program infrastructure. With sustained investment, the state could develop a true statewide artist corps—creating a lasting system for deploying artists in public service across New York.

**5. FUND AND EXPAND THE SAVING PERFORMING ARTS AND CULTURAL EXPERIENCES (NY SPACE) PROGRAM.** The governor's proposed \$10 million NY SPACE initiative would help nonprofit performing arts organizations acquire and stabilize permanent venues. The legislature should act to fund this program and position it as the foundation for a longer-term strategy to expand access to affordable space for the arts. Over time, the program should expand to support organizations seeking to create new spaces in development projects, activate vacant storefronts and underutilized buildings, and secure long-term affordable leases. It should also help address ongoing operating challenges, including rising insurance costs and maintenance expenses. Expanding access to stable, affordable space will be essential to sustaining the sector's recent growth.

**6. GENERATE AND DEDICATE RECURRING REVENUE FOR THE ARTS.** The arts ecosystem remains highly vulnerable to fiscal swings and one-time funding cycles. To improve long-term stability, policymakers should establish recurring revenue streams dedicated to arts and culture. Potential sources include billboard taxes, surcharges on overnight stays, ticket surcharges on events at major stadiums, and value-capture tools tied to new development. The state should also enable the creation of local cultural districts supported by modest, dedicated funding streams to sustain programming and maintenance over time. Establishing predictable revenue would allow the sector to plan, grow, and contribute more consistently to regional economies.

**7. EXPAND AND STANDARDIZE NEW YORK'S PERCENT FOR ART POLICY STATEWIDE.** New York City's Percent for Art program has, for more than 40 years, required that a share of major public construction budgets be dedicated to public art—transforming public spaces across the city. New York State has a more limited version of this policy tied to certain state building projects, but it does not apply broadly across economic development or infrastructure investments. The state should expand and standardize this approach to cover all major state-funded economic development and infrastructure projects. Doing so would ensure that arts and culture are integrated from the outset, enhancing public spaces while supporting local artists and creative economies.

#### ABOUT THIS SERIES

**Mohawk Valley's Creative Spark** is part of a series of 10 reports—one for each of the state's economic development regions—documenting the growing power of the arts as a catalyst for economic vitality, as well as the challenges facing the state's arts sector.

For more, check out: [nycfuture.org/NYCreativeSpark](https://nycfuture.org/NYCreativeSpark)