

MARCH 2026

Center *for an*
Urban
Future

WESTERN NY'S CREATIVE SPARK

Center *for an* Urban Future

WESTERN NEW YORK'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.

CREATIVES REBUILD NEW YORK

This report was made possible thanks to support from **Creatives Rebuild New York**.

Any opinions, findings, or recommendations expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of our funders.

General operating support for the Center for an Urban Future has been provided by **The Clark Foundation** and the **Altman Foundation**.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Jonathan Bowles

EDITORIAL & POLICY DIRECTOR

Eli Dvorkin

CHIEF OF STAFF

Stephanie Arevalo

SENIOR EDITOR

Dorian Block

SENIOR DATA & POLICY RESEARCHER

Rachel Neches

SENIOR FELLOW FOR CLIMATE & OPPORTUNITY

John Surico

POLICY RESEARCHER

Alejandra Díaz-Pizarro

RESEARCH AND OPERATIONS ASSOCIATE

Sophia Tumolo

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Gifford Miller (Chairman)

Margaret Anadu

Jonathan Bowles

Rafael E. Cestero

Russell Dubner

Garnesha Ezediario

Susan Fine

Kyle Kimball

Katy Knight

Jessie Lazarus

David Lebenstein

Eric S. Lee

Josh Moskowitz

Monisha Nariani

Max Neukirchen

Andrew Reicher

Peter Schubert

John Siegal

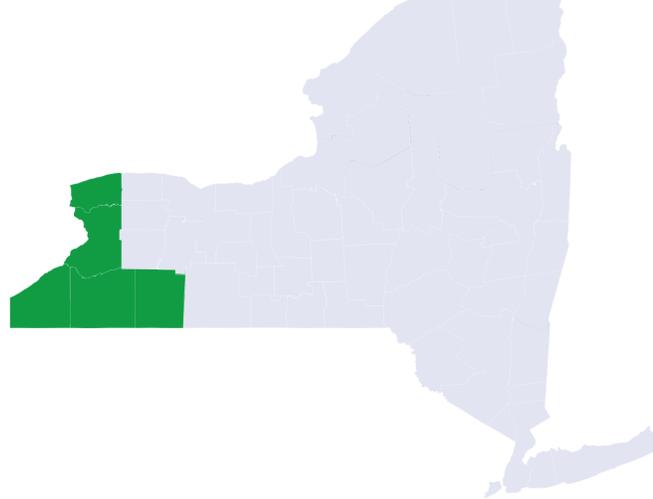
Thomas Vecchione

Sherry Wang

Kate Wittels

Regional Arts Profile

Western New York



WHEN DANCER AND CHOREOGRAPHER SUKANYA BURMAN first visited Jamestown in 2017, she noticed “good bones”: a grassroots arts scene, historic performing arts spaces, and anchor cultural institutions. Drawn by possibility and affordability, she relocated from New York City during the pandemic and joined a growing community of artists investing in Western New York’s small towns.

Today, Jamestown now has its first professional dance company, Sukanya Burman Dance, and a new Jamestown Dance Festival, which this year attracted more than 700 attendees downtown for a weekend of performances, workshops, and film screenings. “People said presenting Indian dance wouldn’t work here,” Burman recalls. “They were proven wrong—people were curious, they loved it, and they came back. And many are experiencing professional dance for the first time.”

Across the region, even when they are often financially struggling themselves, artists like Burman are helping to revitalize downtowns and expand access to the arts. From 2014 to 2024, employment in Western New York’s arts and culture sector shot up 32.6 percent, adding over 1,000 jobs—even as overall employment declined 0.7 percent. Among the fastest-growing industries are fine arts schools (+31.3 percent, +274 jobs), museums (+29.9 percent, +122 jobs), and theaters (+20.8 percent, +104 jobs).¹

More artists are calling the region home than ever before. The number of resident art and design workers has grown 26.9 percent over the last decade, nearing 3,000 in total, while the overall population grew just 1 percent. The fastest-growing disciplines include fashion designers (+225 percent, +99 total), merchandise displayers and window trimmers (+131 percent, +351 total), craft artists (+92.8 percent, +77 total), and fine artists (+82 percent, +100 total). This expanding community has infused new energy into main streets, drawn visitors, and encouraged more young people to put down roots.

The arts are breathing new life into smaller communities and rural towns. In Fredonia and Dunkirk, the Fredonia Street Piano Project places artist-designed pianos in public spaces, inviting spontaneous performances on sidewalks and in parks. In Allegany County, the Allegany Artisans Studio Tours open local studios to visitors each year. In Springville, artists Alisia Glasier and Max Collins, in partnership with the Springville Center for the Arts, converted a vacant Main Street storefront into The Lab, a vibrant gallery and studio space. In Jamestown, comedian Paul Clemente’s long-running open mic night, Karate Sleepover, continues to attract comedians, musicians, and poets from across the region.

Western New York is also home to the Seneca Nation of Indians, which opened the Onöhsagwë:de’ Cultural Center in 2018. And nearby, at Jamestown Community College, artist Kaycee Colburn spent two years as an artist-in-residence sharing her art and Seneca culture—a residency that culminated in the opening of her own downtown gallery dedicated to Indigenous art.

Buffalo has long been the region’s cultural powerhouse, and its affordable real estate has made it fertile ground for innovation. In 2014, artist Dennis Maher transformed an abandoned church in Allentown into The Assembly House—an “architectural dreamworld” and hands-on design and construction learning center. A few years later, the Buffalo Institute for Contemporary Art (BICA) was founded in a converted mechanic’s garage. BICA, which has grown to host exhibitions, a free alternative art school, a regional print magazine, and a regranting program for artists, has since found a permanent home in the Essex Art Center, a former ice house turned creative hub.

A combination of affordable spaces and a thriving creative community has supported a surge of new arts organizations. “Together, having affordable places for creative things to happen, like the Niagara Arts and Cultural Center in the former Niagara Falls High School housing and the Buffalo Arts Studio in a former auto plant, and having a thriving arts

community are key to the recipe that makes Buffalo such a vibrant place for the arts,” says Nathan Ely, photographer and education director of the Center for Exploratory and Perceptual Arts.

Buffalo’s neighborhoods are becoming more vibrant as well. Anchored by institutions like Evening House Books and Western New York Book Arts Center, the city designated Washington Street as “The Literary Corridor of Buffalo.” The city’s theater district is also experiencing a revival: Shea’s Performing Arts Center now hosts national tours of Broadway shows, and Road Less Traveled Productions has expanded its outreach through a new internship program for early-career theater artists.

The region’s creative talent is gaining recognition locally and nationally. Hip-hop artist and producer A.I. The Anomaly has released four albums, collaborated with Grammy winners, and launched Get Fokus’d Productions, a media arts company supporting local creatives. Fiber artist Jozef Bajus paid tribute to his father’s legacy through using reimagined materials at a recent solo exhibition at Buffalo Arts Studio. Multidisciplinary artist Shasti O’Leary Soudant has installed her vibrant, mathematically inspired sculptures in public spaces from Buffalo to Jacksonville to Omaha, while her illustrations have appeared on the covers of bestselling novels by authors including Stephen King.

Public investment has played a key role in fueling this growth. Almost 20 percent (eight of 41) of New York’s Regional Economic Development Council (REDC) grants made in 2025 in the area went to arts and culture projects in 2026, including \$1 million to restore the Rapid’s Theatre in Niagara Falls—up from 8 percent in 2021.² In 2025, the Colored Musicians Club and Jazz Museum—an anchor of Buffalo’s Michigan Street African American Heritage Corridor and the nation’s longest continuously-operating Black-owned music venue—underwent a major expansion supported by a \$2 million Empire State Development grant.

Private industry is taking notice, too. In 2023, Great Point Studios opened a \$50 million film and television production facility in Buffalo, signaling a new chapter for the city’s film sector.³

Still, sustaining a career in the arts remains difficult. Arts workers in Western New York earn an average salary of \$41,454, well below the regional average of \$70,803. Almost 68 percent of Western New York artists surveyed by Creatives Rebuild New York say that they can not cover a \$400 cash emergency.

Federal funding cuts are threatening to deepen the challenge. From 2024 to 2025, National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) funding directed to the region fell by 71 percent, from \$430,882 to \$125,000—funding that serves as crucial life-line for many in the arts community.⁴ The number of artists and organizations receiving NEA grants dropped from 16 in 2024 to just four the following year; several organizations lost support entirely, including the Buffalo Literary Center and Torn Space Theater. As Nathan Ely, education director at Buffalo’s Center for Exploratory and Perceptual Art, warns: “90 percent of our funding comes from grants. Losing NEA funding means that New York State must pick up the slack or a lot of these institutions are going to die.”

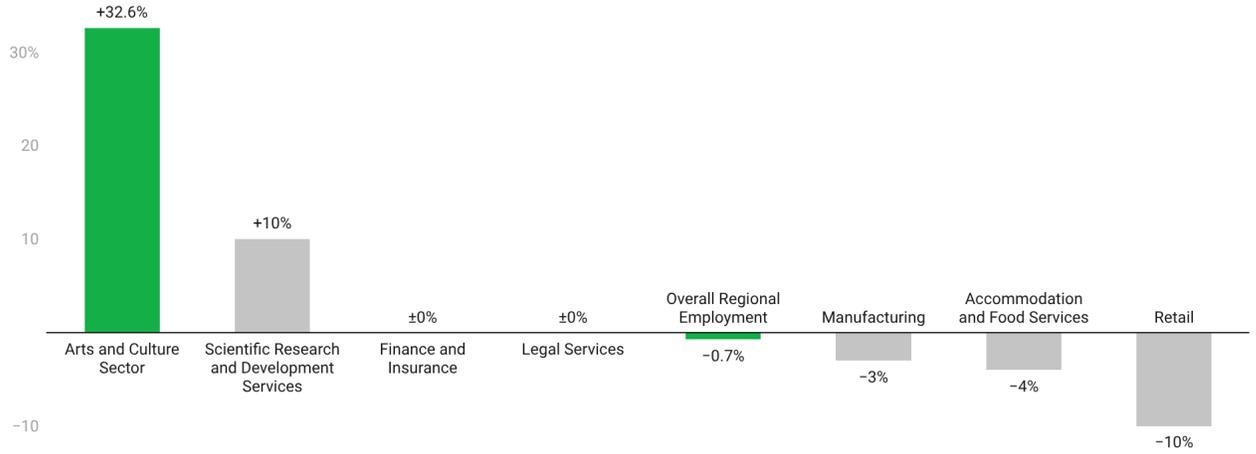
With federal funding on shaky ground, state support is more important than ever. Yet after adjusting for inflation, New York State Council on the Arts (NYSCA) operating grants to Western New York have fallen 10.7 percent over the past 25 years—from \$4.1 million in FY 2000 to \$3.7 million in FY 2025.

Without renewed investment, many of the organizations that anchor Western New York’s communities—from small-town galleries to Buffalo’s historic music clubs—risk losing hard-won ground. But with the right support, the region’s artists and institutions can continue to bring people together, strengthen local economies, and make Western New York a vibrant place to live and work.

1. Center for an Urban Future analysis of data from Lightcast.
2. Center for an Urban Future analysis of New York’s Regional Economic Development Council grants.
3. Tim O’Shei, “Hollywood on the Niagara? New Great Point Film Studio Could Deliver,” *Great Point Studios* (press release), May 13, 2024, <https://greatpointstudios.com/hollywood-on-the-niagara-new-great-point-film-studio-could-deliver/>.
4. Center for an Urban Future analysis of National Endowment for the Arts grants.

Western New York's arts and culture sector grows as other sectors shrink

Change in jobs, 2014 to 2024 (%)

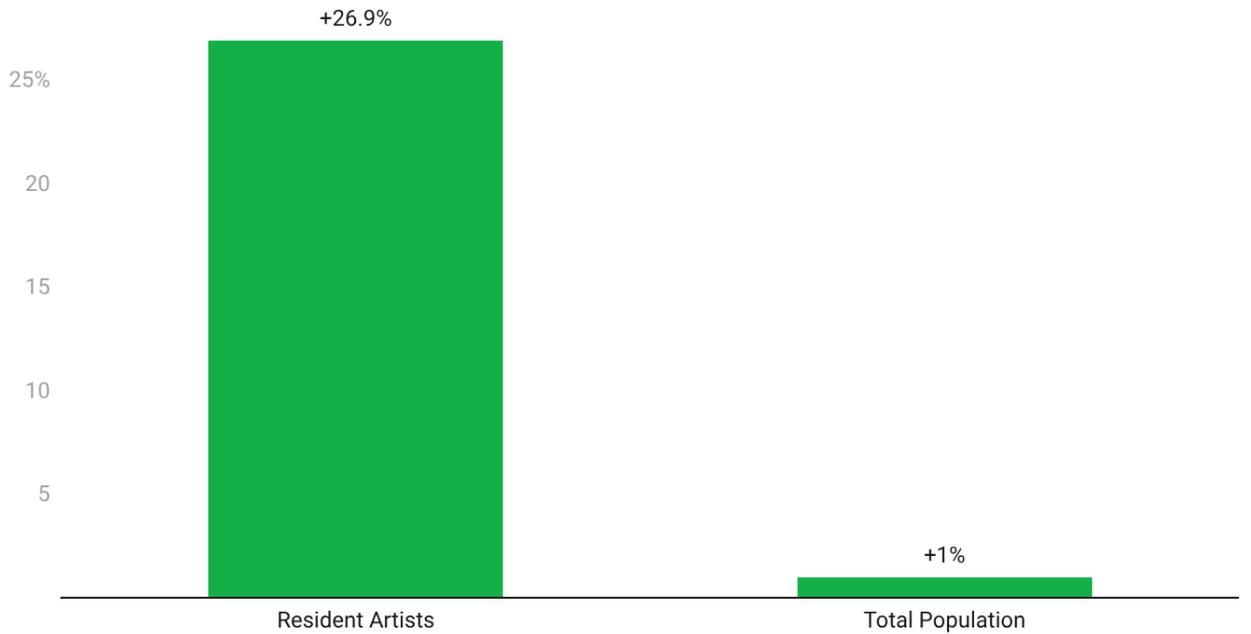


Arts and culture sector totaled 4,089 jobs in 2024

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

Resident art and design workers drive population growth in Western New York

Change in population, 2014 to 2024 (%)

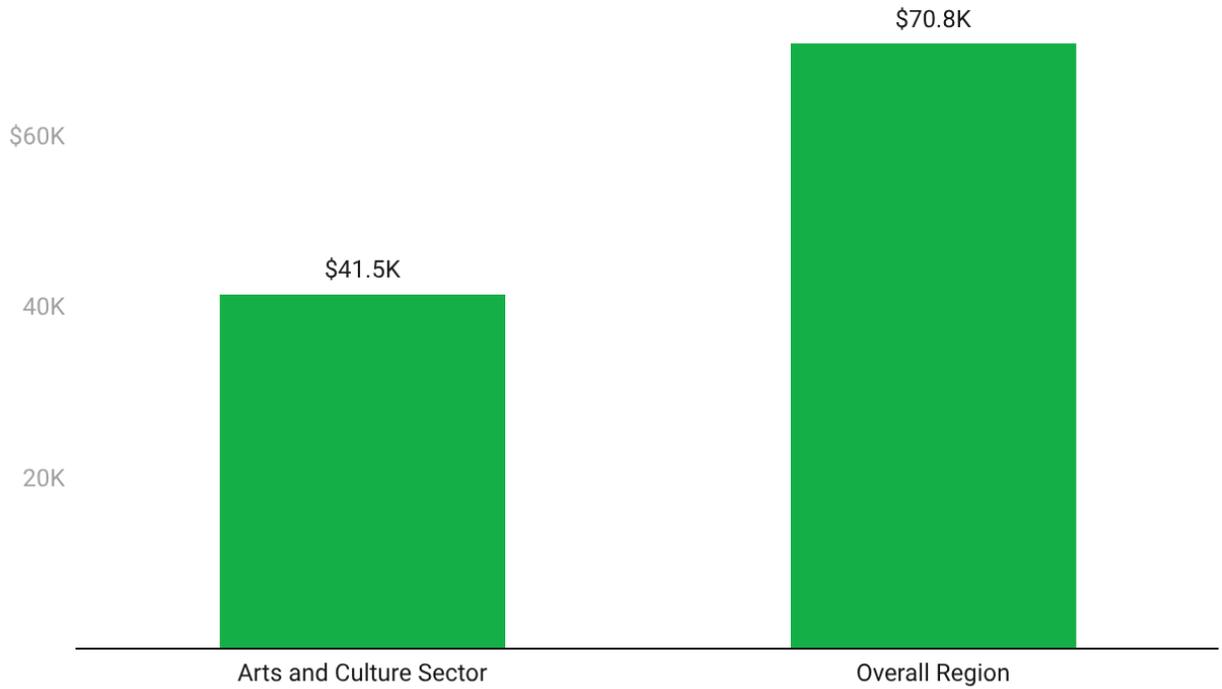


Resident art and design worker population totaled 2,942 in 2024

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

In Western New York, arts and culture workers earn far less than the private-sector average annual wage

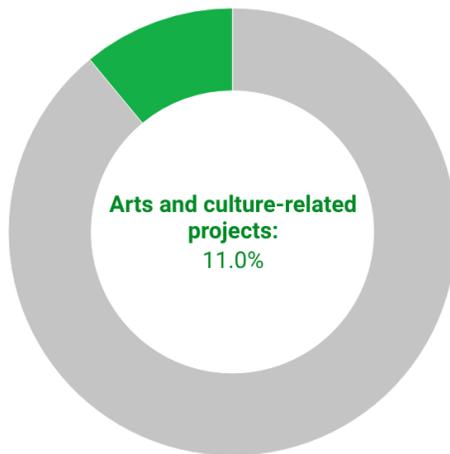
2024



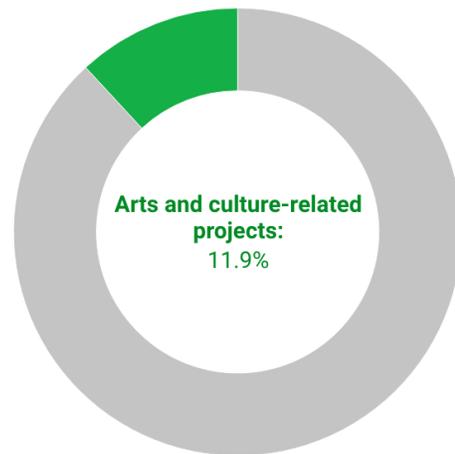
Source: Center for an Urban Future analysis of data from Lightcast. • Created with Datawrapper

In Western New York, 11 percent of FY 2025 REDC funding went towards arts and culture projects

■ Other projects ■ Arts and culture-related projects



Western New York



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

Western New York'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