

CITY & REGION

Arts Access program to give qualifying residents free tickets to cultural events

Holders of EBT cards eligible for free program

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As more than 20 Western New York theaters prepare for tonight's annual **Curtain Up! celebration**, a Buffalo arts group is launching a program to provide free tickets to theater productions and other arts activities to poor residents.

The Arts Access program, announced today by the Arts Services Initiative, will provide free tickets to events at more than roughly 30 participating cultural organizations to members of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP.

The program, modeled on similar attempts to broaden arts access in Portland, Ore., and Memphis, Tenn., will provide a pass to qualified residents who have an electronic benefit transfer card. That pass can be used for free tickets to theater productions, admission to participating art galleries and other cultural organizations for the cardholder and family members.

Participating organizations include all 19 members of the Theatre Alliance of Buffalo, including the Kavinoky Theatre, the Irish Classical Theatre Company, Road Less Traveled Productions and Torn Space Theater. Other participating groups include LehrerDance, Albright-Knox Art Gallery and the Explore & More Children's Museum.

Organizers are encouraging more arts groups to join the program.

Tod A. Kniazuk, executive director of the Arts Services Initiative, said the program comes as awareness of Western New York's arts and cultural offerings is increasing.

"It's the right time for this, because obviously arts and culture is really leading the charge in terms of community revitalization, and becoming something that more and more people want to become a part of," Kniazuk said. "And we're taking down a barrier to that accessibility."

In addition to providing free tickets to qualifying Western New Yorkers, the program will include a shuttle bus program that will bring underserved residents in Erie and Niagara counties to cultural events.

And for those who may not qualify for SNAP benefits, Kniazuk said, the program's website, arts-access.net, will be a centralized location for information on existing free cultural activities and discounted ticket programs. Those interested in taking advantage of the program also can call 362-8389.

"There are poor people in every community," Kniazuk said. For those residents, he added, "There's real barriers to accessing any kind of enrichment activities. What we saw was that there are some things available – there are organizations that are free all the time, but they tend not to be overly publicized. Or, if they are publicized, they're publicized to the audience that's already a fan of arts and culture."

Much of the program will be centered on the region's thriving theater scene, which includes more than 20 professional or semiprofessional producing companies.

For Randall Kramer, the founder and director of MusicalFare Theatre in Snyder, the free ticket program is an opportunity to build audiences in a more inclusive way and to build on the current movement to more closely tie the region's identity to its cultural industry.

"Theater and culture and the arts has to become part of who we are, just like chicken wings, roast beef and sports," Kramer said. "You can't ignore an entire segment of the population just because they may not have the resources to participate. It just makes for a better experience for everybody."

The program has been funded for a year by the New York State Council on the Arts, Empire State Development, M&T Bank, the John R. Oishei Foundation and the consortium of local foundations known as the Fund for the Arts. Kniazuk said he intends to continue the program beyond its initial funding period.

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