



Introduction

Good afternoon, Chair Watts and honorable members of the legislature:

On behalf of the board and staff at CNY Arts, and the artists, audiences, and general public whom we serve, thank you for this opportunity to address the body today.

I would like to begin by introducing CNY Arts and sharing a bit about the importance of our work and the nature of our longstanding and successful partnership with Onondaga County. I would also like to emphasize our deep gratitude to our County representatives for your commitment to supporting the arts in our communities.

History

CNY Arts is Central New York's regional arts council, and it is our mission to promote, support, and celebrate arts, culture, and heritage in our region. We offer a variety of programs and services to our creative constituents, including regrants, professional development, networking opportunities, educational initiatives, promotional support, adjudicated art competitions, sector-specific data analysis, and even exhibit space. CNY Arts' offices are located in downtown Syracuse, in the historic Carnegie Library building.

Since 1957, CNY Arts – formerly the Cultural Resources Council – has worked in close coordination with the County of Onondaga to encourage and sustain the cultural vitality of our communities. CNY arts also partners with city, state, and federal units of government to meet our mission. Between 2006 and 2012, CNY Arts contracted with the New York State Council on the Arts at their request to expand our service territory. Today, CNY Arts serves a six-county, 5,500 square mile region, though the center of our operations and the majority of our programming remains concentrated in our hub of Onondaga.

Prior to 2012, funding support for the major cultural institutions in Onondaga County was determined on a line-by-line basis in the annual County budget. Approximately 14 years ago, CNY Arts was tasked by the office of the County Executive and members of the legislature to establish a new, streamlined, and equitable model for funding. In this new system, grant resources would be administered by CNY Arts on behalf of Onondaga County. To accomplish this, a broad coalition of local cultural leaders gathered to form the Arts and Culture Leadership Alliance, a nonprofit advisory body responsible for creating a transparent and equitable model for redistribution of resources that is the foundation for CNY Arts' County-based general operating support grants.

In doing so, CNY Arts is pleased and proud to leverage our capacity and expertise to create legislative and operational efficiencies for our partners in County government. Today, I am joined by Pam Murchison, Executive Director of the Syracuse Orchestra and President of ACLA, as well as Franklin Fry, Executive Director of Redhouse Arts Center and Chair of the ACLA advocacy committee.

Programs

In addition to funding the County's major arts, culture, and heritage institutions, CNY Arts also administers regrant funds for a variety of event and project-specific programming that benefits and uplifts residents of every district within the County, examples include:

- **Marketing for Economic Development:** this program bolsters the promotional capacity of our cultural venues to attract new and returning audiences, with a particular emphasis on targeting out-of-county markets and audience demographics, generating new revenue streams and tangible downstream benefits in adjacent sectors, like lodging and hospitality.
- **Small Festivals Fund:** this program is designed to support the wide variety of year-round festival events that celebrate the cultural diversity of our communities.

- Recent grantees include: CNY Pride, Festival Latino, the Jewish Community Center of Syracuse Klezfest, Solway / Geddes Field Days, and the Semi-classical Indian Music Concert.
- Tier 3 Project Support: funding to support nonprofit agencies with an annual operating budget of \$249,000 or less and whose programming is primarily arts and culture-related.
 - Recent grantees include: Party in the Square, Syracuse Shakespeare in the Park, and the Westcott Community Center
- Microgrants: this program empowers small, grassroots, unincorporated entities to contribute to the cultural development of Onondaga County.
 - Recent grantees include: the German-American Society of Central New York, Civic Morning Musicals, and the Preservation Association of Central New York

Funding for CNY Arts' grants and programming is derived from County Room Occupancy Tax. As our cultural amenities continue to attract out-of-county visitors, this mechanism creates a durable model for long-term, sustainable investment. Between 2022 and 2025, the gross economic impact of our largest county-based cultural venues grew from \$45,703,000 to \$52,400,000 – an 11% increase. During the same time frame, out-of-county attendance to those venues also grew from 95,700 to 189,000 – an impressive 98% increase.

Process

Applications to CNY Arts grants are evaluated by independent groups of volunteer panelists, representing a diverse cross-section of individuals including artists, directors of cultural agencies, marketing experts, educators, and community organizers. Panelists are trained to assess applications according to different criteria, including creative merit, feasibility, accessibility, anticipated audience attendance, and economic impact. Panelists are also required to avoid any conflict of interest. Panel funding recommendations are then presented to the CNY Arts board of directors and the County of Onondaga for review and ratification.

Film

In addition to regrants, CNY Arts also administers PRIMED – Production Rebate Incentives for Movies and Entertainment Development. At its core, PRIMED is an economic development program designed to encourage the growth and sustainability of Central New York’s burgeoning film and media industry. Since 2021, more than 20 feature-length films have completed principal production in Onondaga County, generating tangible economic benefits for our local tradespeople and stimulating downstream spending in adjacent sectors such as hospitality, lodging, transportation, and commercial retail.

PRIMED is modeled after a tried-and-true incentive formula first developed by CNY Arts and supported by Empire State Development between 2018 and 2021. With funding made possible by the Upstate Revitalization Initiative, CNY Arts managed a \$5 million incentive to help jumpstart the local film industry. After the conclusion of this program, CNY Arts contracted with Onondaga County to administer PRIMED, which was structured according to the successful precedent established by the state model. PRIMED funding is derived from federal ARPA relief funds, offering crucial support to the performing arts, which was one among the most hard-hit creative disciplines within the arts and culture sector.

Applications to PRIMED undergo a rigorous review process. First, an independent auditor reviews the completeness and accuracy of all application materials, including the script, principal stakeholders, proof of financing, production budget, schedule, marketing collateral, proposed cast, and a certificate of conditional eligibility authorized by the New York State Film Tax Credit Office.

A panel is then convened to review the creative merit, feasibility, diversity and representation among cast and crew, and the economic impact of the proposed project. If approved, the applicant is eligible to receive between 25-30% of all qualified production costs incurred in Onondaga County, up to a maximum of between \$100,000 and \$300,000. Productions must provide expense ledgers with corresponding back-up to verify all claimed, qualified costs.

To date, approximately \$5.3 million dollars of a total \$6 million allocated for PRIMED has been disbursed or obligated. CNY Arts anticipates that the full amount will be expended by the end of 2026. PRIMED has achieved and exceeded important benchmarks of program performance, including:

- Creating over 101,000 labor hours for local crew members
- Generating over \$14,000,000 in realized, direct economic impact
- Forecast to generate over \$26,000,000 in total economic impact – a 4:1 return on investment
- Supporting productions that have received critical acclaim, including the 2025 feature *Plainclothes*, which earned the Dramatic Special Jury Award for Ensemble Cast at the prestigious Sundance Film Festival
- Attracting a number of high-profile celebrities and talent to film in Onondaga County, boosting civic pride

I am pleased and proud to share with you today just a glimpse of the many benefits that the cultural sector contributes to Onondaga County. I would also like to emphasize that the arts do not exist in a silo, but are a part of a broader social and economic ecosystem.

We understand that our representatives and elected officials work hard to address many different policy priorities and areas of need. I invite you to consider that “art is the answer.” Whether the conversation concerns economic development, tourism, public safety, or improved educational outcomes, investing in the arts measurably enhances all aspects of civic life.

We believe that access to the arts is as important as any public utility; it’s hard to imagine living somewhere without an electrical grid, and I suspect it would also be a challenge to live somewhere without theaters, festivals, music, crafts, and places to gather. In fact, several recent studies have concluded that Upstate and Central New York are experiencing dramatic growth within the cultural sector. For example, a 2026 study conducted by Center for an Urban Future determined that:

- The resident artist population of Central New York increased by 34% between 2014 and 2024 – nearly twice the rate of New York City
- Cultural employment also grew by 23%, even as other sector experienced retrenchment, like finance and insurance

And a 2025 study by Southern Methodist University identified Syracuse as among the top 100 most vibrant cities nationwide in terms of cultural vibrancy.

Every community is a mosaic of different peoples, industries, infrastructure, amenities, and attractions. The unique character of our County prompts us to reflect on how these individual “tiles” – especially our historic venues, marquee events, resident artists, cultural workers, and visitors – form a complete and indivisible portrait of a vibrant, welcoming, and economically competitive future available to everyone.

Thank you again for your time, consideration, and support for the arts and culture sector in Onondaga County. We look forward to continuing and deepening our partnership with our County elected officials in the years ahead.

Alexander Korman
Executive Director
CNY Arts