

# **“Program Allows Artists to Trade Creative Services for Health Care”**

**by Janaya Williams**

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NEW YORK, NY June 15, 2010 —Working artists in New York are twice as likely to be living without adequate health insurance as those who make their living by other means. And after health care funding was slashed by \$775 million dollars in the most recent state budget, it may be more urgent than ever for people who make a living through creative means to make their health care dollars stretch.

Artist's Access, a five-year old program at Woodhull Hospital in Brooklyn, allows artists and performers to trade their creative services for medical care. After applying through HHC Options, a city-subsidized program for the low and middle-income uninsured, Artist's Access gives artists the equivalent of \$40 in health care services for each hour of creative work at the hospital.

Participants have a wide range of options: visual artists brighten the halls and walkways with murals, actors role play with doctors to help them practice delivering bad news and photographers snap pictures of newborns as a keepsake for the parents.

On a recent afternoon, dancer Maxine Steinman taught modified yoga to attendees at the hospital's Senior Wellness Day in order to earn credits under the program that can later be cashed in for medical care. Steinman has a 14-year-old dance company in Brooklyn that employs up to seven dancers. But, she says she has no health insurance.

"The places that I work, because its not full time, they don't give me any benefits," Steinman says. "My husband's an artist too, so we come here. I know a couple of other artists that are involved, because we don't have a lot of income, and when we do its not steady. We might make a lot one month and the next month nothing."

Amy Duquette is the Artist Access program coordinator. She explains that for every hour spent providing creative services, artists receive 40 credits, which translates into 40 dollars worth of care. Services are fee-scaled based on an artist's income, so clinic visits can cost anywhere between \$15 and \$60. Duquette says that credits can be used for any service that the hospital provides.

"That includes overnight stays, ER services, surgeries, mental health and the dental clinic. Anything you can do in this hospital, you can use your credits to pay off," Duquette said.

Artists Access was Woodhull medical director Dr Edward Fishkin's idea. Fishkin noticed an influx of young artists moving into the neighborhoods that the hospital serves--primarily Williamsburg, Bushwick and Bed-Stuy.

"We discovered that a lot of the artists living in Williamsburg were uninsured and had no access to health care," said Fishkin. "They were keeping their fingers crossed that nothing would happen to them."

Fractured Atlas is a national nonprofit group that provides support services to independent artists. Executive Director Adam Huttler says that Artist Access does provide a valuable service, but falls short of being a real solution to the underlying problem of artists going without health care.

"We are treating the symptoms and we're doing it in a one-at-a-time manner that can't possibly scale to address the problem on a macro level," says Huttler.

Maxine Steinman says that her family used to have a moderately-priced health care plan, but when her husband required care for his kidney stones, the company refused to cover them. They ended up paying off medical bills for years and years. For now, she says, the flexibility of the Artists Access program is the most practical option for her family. She doesn't have any plans to use the credits she's accruing, but she is banking them for later.

"Hopefully nothing bad will happen and I won't need to use all the credits," she says.

According to Woodhull officials, about 600 artists have participated in the exchange since the program started and about 200 are currently earning credits for their artistic contributions.

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