

ARTSTART STRATEGIC PLAN 2025-2028

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WHERE THE ARTS FLOURISH, COMMUNITIES THRIVE.

Our Mission: To strengthen our community through arts education and cultural engagement.

Our Vision: To continue as a cornerstone for community arts engagement. As a highly distinctive cultural center, ArtStart provides a variety of exhibitions, programming and event activities which leverage art to engage community members in cultural, social, and economic development.

INTRODUCTION

When ArtStart was created in 2011, it was a volunteer-led organization, responding to a need and opportunity to create a center for the arts in downtown Rhinelander. This place is special and holds a history of community-led and inspired art, as an initial Arts in the Small Community location in the 1960s, with The School of the Arts from the 1960s to the 2010s, and the creation of The Northern Arts Council. That group of hardworking and dedicated volunteers created the basis to provide arts and cultural programming to thousands of people in Rhinelander and the Northwoods region.

In 2014 a staff position was created, with an additional staff person being added in 2017 and again in 2020. As staffing and volunteer leadership has grown, ArtStart has worked to expand its partnerships, work in collaborative, creative ways, and be responsive to the needs of the community. In 2025 over 3500 people were served within ArtStart's building, with thousands more impacted with the programming outside of the building. ArtStart's partnerships include working with the school district, Nicolet College, other arts organizations and local businesses, city and county government, the airport, health and social services agencies, and more.

All this is practical, because ArtStart exists in and for the community. It is also rooted in the history of this place, and that history will guide ArtStart's future work. As Robert E. Gard wrote in *The Arts in the Small Community*, "The springs of the American spirit are at the grass roots. Opportunities must exist in places where they never have existed before. A consciousness of the people, a knowledge of their power to generate and nourish art, and a provision of ways in which they may do so are essential for our time."

WHY THIS STRATEGIC PLAN?

ArtStart is at an important growth point. The organizational model has evolved to include professional staff, a dedicated board, and a wide roster of volunteers. ArtStart's programming continues to include visual arts programming, music performances, and classes, but has also grown to find ways that the arts can partner with other sectors and support the community.

Additionally, ArtStart has been in its building now for 14 years, and is dedicated to a physical presence in Rhinelander. But ArtStart is also more than just a building, with programming across the community. With a long-term lease but limitations on renovations in the current setting, a need for certainty around the future of the building is a strategic priority, and now is the time for some big, forward-looking dreams.

ArtStart is rooted in the spirit and ethos of the framework for arts development offered in *The Arts in the Small Community*, and is intentionally building on that history. That essential document urged partnership, inclusion, and grass roots creation to nourish art that was reflective of and for the community. With that in mind, these **guiding questions** will shape ArtStart's ongoing work:

- Is this work informed by and accessible to the people in our region?
- How many partner groups or networks does this work connect with, and if there are people or organizations already doing this work, how can we partner with or support them?
- Are we building or promoting local resources that can be a model for others across the state?
- What resources does this take, and what does it bring in to keep our organization sound?

These questions are supported by ArtStart's core values, goals and commitment to and understanding of diversity, equity, and inclusion, which remain consistent for the organization.

Our Values:

- ArtStart is first and foremost a community development project.
- Artists are fundamental, valued, and at the center of cultural engagement work.
- Cultural values are intrinsic to the health of a progressive community and as such must be integrated into all phases of community planning.
- Cultural activities provide a sense of social cohesion and creative outlet, supporting mental and physical health and wellness.
- Cultural activities must be available to everyone, regardless of means, as every individual has something unique and valuable to share.
- Education is a means to help people identify assets, capacities, needs, resources, and solutions.
- Civic involvement (or participation) is fundamental to improve the quality of community/neighborhood life.
- Internal and external collaborations and partnerships are essential.
- Community engagement, information, and knowledge are key to decision-making.

Our Goals:

- To support and participate in the development of the broader Northwoods region and beyond.
- Maintain a highly distinctive cultural organization as a cornerstone of the regional arts landscape.
- Provide cross-sector programs that advance the overall wellbeing of communities across the region.
- Provide opportunities to view cutting-edge artworks and present new trends in contemporary visual art.
- Provide a forum to connect with interesting people who share cultural and creative interests.
- Make programs and events accessible to everyone.

Our commitment to and understanding of diversity, equity, and inclusion:

With humility ArtStart welcomes everyone, no matter where you come from, how you look or how you identify – regardless of artistic experience, interest or talent. Through arts education and cultural engagement, we prioritize growth and vow to do our part in creating a more inclusive and equitable world for all.

ARTSTART STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

ArtStart will focus on three areas of growth and opportunity in the years covered by this strategic plan, offering guidelines and space for responsiveness. The 2006 edition of *The Arts in the Small Community* calls out the need for these frameworks and flexibility: “Arts development isn’t a set of techniques, although important organizational skills are involved. It is, rather, an *attitude*, a philosophical framework that enables developers to choose appropriate activities for their community.” With these focus areas and the guiding questions, values, and goals, ArtStart will build towards the future so that arts flourish, and communities thrive.

Art & Health

The work that ArtStart does plays a vital role in the overall vibrancy, health, and wellbeing of the communities we call home. Art in and of itself is a healing, connecting activity, and the artists who have exhibited, taught, or performed at ArtStart over the years are great examples of this. In this next phase of programming ArtStart will build an intentional health focus, because the data is clear, arts participation reduces loneliness and stress; it can prevent depression, enhance cognitive and mental function; and in young people it supports success in education. These are core organizational values, aligned with the frameworks of *The Arts in the Small Community*, and relevant given the social stressors of our time.

- ArtStart will **focus on health** – healthy people, healthy communities, and healthy places. This will include specific focus and partnerships around art and the dimensions of physical and mental health, and continue ArtStart’s core mission of strengthening the community through arts education and cultural engagement.
- ArtStart will **be responsive and adaptable** to find expert and resourced partners to pursue this work. This focus cannot be ArtStart’s alone, and ArtStart’s expertise needs to

be paired with other organizations, and individuals for these opportunities and programs to thrive. The expert partners include the artists who are already a part of ArtStart's community – our programs will continue to include and build on those relationships and creative skills.

- What works in Rhinelander can be an example for others, so ArtStart will develop a model for **replication across the state** to expand its network, offer constructive support to other communities, and highlight regional assets and resources.

Building & Capital Campaign

ArtStart began with a dream and the space came after, and now we have grown back into the dreaming phase. For the past 14 years, ArtStart has occupied the former post office building in downtown Rhinelander, in a mutually beneficial arrangement with the City of Rhinelander. Over this time, ArtStart has been a community development and economic engine in downtown Rhinelander, bringing in people and supporting new businesses. As programming has grown, and the age of the building has shown itself, despite approximately \$340,000 in significant improvements over ArtStart's stewardship of the space. Now is the time for dreaming about ArtStart's next chapter, which will be done with our community and through a board-approved partnership with the Robert E. Gard Foundation. ArtStart remains committed to keeping the organization open, visible, and accessible, and to be a partner to local creative and economic development efforts.

- As part of the commitment to be a steward of ArtStart's mission and responsible about how resources are deployed, ArtStart will **evaluate building options** that allow the organization to grow into the future. This includes options to stay in the building under the current agreement, seek to acquire the building for more expansive investment, or find a new site to occupy or build that allows ArtStart to best fulfill its mission.
- As part of current operations and future planning, ArtStart will establish **staff and volunteer capacity** dedicated to the building and the capital campaign, with expertise in maintenance, site development, and fundraising capacity, to approach these next steps with intentionality and support.
- As these conversations progress, ArtStart is committed to **accessibility and flexibility** of use, to engage community members in supporting and shaping the next steps. ArtStart is a place but it is also an idea, a catalyst for people to create and be engaged with art however they come to ArtStart.

Staffing & Organizational Sustainability

ArtStart's evolution from volunteer-led to professionally staffed has opened up new capacities and opportunities, and the current volunteer recruitment and engagement structure is a success from the previous strategic plan. ArtStart will intentionally focus on staff and organizational capacity, clarity of communication and decision-making, and support for the shared leadership structure to ensure that the organization continues to tend and nourish its people.

- ArtStart will evaluate **staff roles and responsibilities** in light of the ambitions to grow programming and responsiveness as an organization. This includes administrative and

event support so that ArtStart staff can focus on relationship-building and developing new ideas. Where possible, ArtStart will fundraise directly to support staff capacity, and continue to develop and nurture a dedicated base of volunteers who support ArtStart's mission.

- ArtStart will continue to be a proactive **partner and leader** in the Rhinelander community and across the state and country, creating programs with other arts organizations, community institutions, and civic entities. ArtStart has been working in this way since its inception, and in this moment, intentional engagement is necessary. ArtStart will evaluate different levels of partnership, from hands-on doing, to supporting, to planning for future work, so that partnerships match ArtStart's available resources.
- As a best practice, ArtStart will establish **organizational reserves** to build resilience, planning, and opportunity into future budgets. There will be three reserve funds covering key areas of work:
 - Capital, to support building maintenance and upgrades
 - Operating, to serve as a cushion for unexpected budget shifts or expenses
 - Future Idea Fund, a flexible fund to support program and project development

WHAT'S NEXT?

This strategic plan contains big ambitions for ArtStart, for Rhinelander, and for the Northwoods region and beyond. These are achievable ambitions with the dedication of ArtStart's people and partnership of the community. With this framework and these guidelines, ArtStart will work towards the following milestones, and embrace emergent opportunities that support these goals:

- **Year 1** – Expand staffing, include reserves in the budgeting process, continue to build partnerships, and plan for replication resources.
- **Year 2** – Earnest beginnings of the capital campaign, expanded staff and programming capacity, seeding replications in other partner communities.
- **Year 3** – Have a capital campaign in full swing, fully supported staff capacity and partnership growth, replication examples across the state.

As ArtStart pursues these strategic goals, we will focus on storytelling, our identity, and our role within the community to share these stories and goals. ArtStart will work towards this flourishing future, inspired by the words of Robert E. Gard: "Let us put firmly and permanently aside as a cliché of an expired moment in time that art is a frill. Let us accept the goodness of art where we are now, and expand its worth in the places where people live."

WORK NOTES APPENDIX

This internal document supports staff and board understanding on next steps and goals over the next three years. These goals should be used for decision-making, and revisited annually to be updated as the work progresses.

Year 1 – Expand staffing, include reserves in the budgeting process, continue to build partnerships, and plan for replication resources.

Expand staffing

- Identify staffing/consulting needs and compensation, staff initiates then brings to governance for discussion (marketing consultant, campaign manager, etc.)
- Include capacity in a preliminary stage of the capital campaign
- Explore additional sources of income for staff (AmeriCorps, Job Center, Nicolet Temp Work etc.)

Include reserves in the budgeting process

- Identify reserve goal over time including appropriate amount to include in 2026 budget
- Identify fundraising strategies specifically for reserve fund to include in 2026 budget (donor ask, specific event, etc.)

Continue to build partnerships

- Staff continue to build upon partnership with Oneida County Health Department
- Staff continue to engage with WEDC Office of Rural Prosperity Community of Practice for statewide network building funding
- Staff and Board Research and apply to new funders interested in funding Arts & Health initiatives
- Staff reviews partnership network and identifies areas for expansion
- Create a plan for board engagement around partnership growth and outreach (Reactivate Strategic Development Committee)

Plan for replication resources

- Draft model for existing consulting program(s) and add information on community and Arts and Health services ArtStart can provide and add to website
- Launch 2-3 pilot programs that we can use as models that exemplify arts & health/social isolation (Spark!, Substance Use Prevention Programming, Creative Mentorship Program, One Nation One Project)
- Research state and national arts and health networks/ rural networks to join, conferences, etc. to attend and build into budget

Capital campaign

- Work toward permanency in place, evaluating options around ownership and the various steps to take, to inform the sequence of following capital campaign activities
- Develop organizational capacities to support fundraising activities, including technology and role clarity
- Partner with the Gard Foundation for initial foundational work and partnerships, and find support for pre-development activities
- Formalize campaign committees and job roles
- Identify campaign phases and needs to define timeline

Year 2 – Earnest beginnings of the capital campaign, expanded staff and programming capacity, seeding replications in other partner communities.

Expanded staff and programming capacity

- Review current staffing structure/ capacity to determine additional staff expansion/transition (Arts & Health Director, Youth Director)
- Dream about potential cool new programs we could launch in Year 3

Seeding replications in other partner communities

- Solidify 2-3 pilot programs that we can use as models that exemplify arts & health/social isolation (Spark!, Substance Use Prevention Programming, Creative Mentorship Program)
- Identify and pilot additional programs based on stated needs of partners and community members
- Add advising on program models to our consultancy offerings

Capital campaign

- Engage in campaign activities along plan defined in Year 1
- Launch of local campaign committee to build support and engagement in Rhinelander
- Commit staff capacity to community engagement and local communications
- Determine any necessary branding changes or updates

Year 3 – Have a capital campaign in full swing, fully supported staff capacity and partnership growth, replication examples across the region.

Expanded staff and programming capacity

- Assess current organizational model and capacity for additional needs
- Review Community Health Assessment for community needs and collaboration
- Launch cool new programs

Replication examples

- Support the replication of 2-3 programs in other communities that we can use as models that exemplify arts & health/social isolation (Spark!, Substance Use Prevention Programming, Creative Mentorship Program)
- Solidify additional programs piloted in Year 2
- Focused evaluation and documentation of replication activities to inform next steps

Capital campaign

- Engage in campaign activities along plan defined in Year 1 and adapted in Year 2
- Celebrate milestones and continue local and state-wide engagement
- Develop goals for construction and finalize close-out steps for the capital campaign