

Art thou covered?

TEYA VITU Tucson Citizen

Tucson musicians and artists organizing for low-cost health care

A core group on the local arts scene wants to offer Tucson musicians and artists a health-care program matching the most evolved programs in Los Angeles, Chicago and Austin, Texas.

The 2-month-old Tucson Artists and Musicians Health Care Alliance is working toward compiling all the health-care offerings to give the arts community a one-stop shop for health-care information.

"My ultimate goal is to hand money to people who need it, to make sure people aren't sitting there with illnesses and can't get the health care they need," said David Slutes, entertainment director at Hotel Congress and an alliance organizer. "The one thing we can do is get real information out to people who need it. Here's what all self-employed and uninsured people have access to."

Slutes plans to make health care a subtheme of the HoCo Festival on Labor Day weekend at Hotel Congress, 311 E. Congress St.

The alliance may approach University Medical Center to set up a similar group health-care relationship that the Health Alliance for Austin Musicians has with providers for low-cost primary health care and dental services.

"I'm convinced we can do the same thing here," said state Rep. Steve Farley, a Tucson Democrat who is the Legislature's only full-fledged professional artist. "Too many artists have to take two-bit jobs they hate to get (health-care) coverage."

Farley and state Rep. Tom Prezelski, also a Tucson Democrat, are part of the fledgling six-person alliance along with Slutes; Anne-Marie Russell, executive director of the Museum of Contemporary Art Tucson; and Leia Maahs and Reuben Roqueni from the Tucson Pima Arts Council.

"I have real personal experience," said Farley, whose most noticed artwork is the murals along the Broadway underpass. "It's very difficult for someone with a very small business to get affordable health care. We want to extend health care to everybody."

Farley believes a united front among Tucson musicians and artists could serve as a model toward universal health care in Arizona.

For the past nine months, Slutes has tried to put together a health-care program for local musicians. Russell said MOCA serves as an informal support staff for artists with advice about legal services, business tips, financial planning and health-care programs.

"It's all pretty simple if you know what you're doing," Russell said.

"To have a thousand people trying to figure it out all by themselves is crazy."

Slutes and Russell came together in the task force process that led to the draft Tucson Cultural Plan revealed in July. They realized their individual efforts could be combined to serve the entire arts community.

The alliance is the first of many recommended strategies from the draft Tucson Cultural Plan to get full-blown attention.

"If we can eliminate the fear and anxiety about getting health care, we can free up artists to do their work," Russell said.

Slutes added: "I think all the creative people will feel more comfortable. They will know they have a safety net of health care."