



Museum Profile  
**VISUAL ARTS CENTER  
OF NEW JERSEY**

UNION COUNTY, NJ

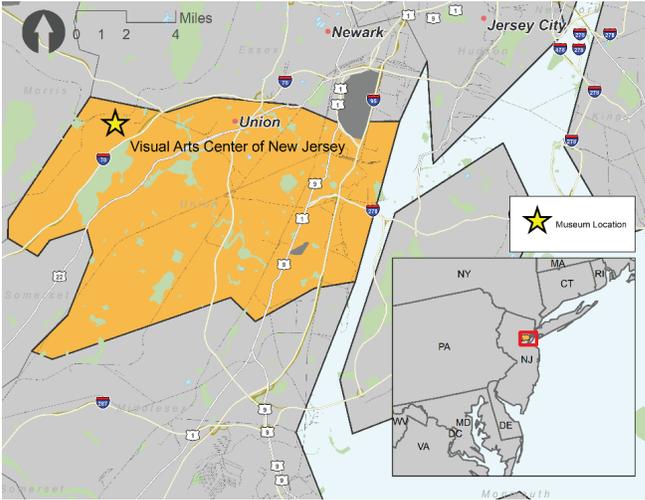
# Museum Profile: Visual Arts Center of New Jersey



## UNION COUNTY, NEW JERSEY

The Visual Arts Center of New Jersey (VAC-NJ) is located in Union County in Summit, New Jersey. At 23,000 square feet, VAC-NJ operates out of a relatively small building just outside Summit's town center. It sits about half a mile from a New Jersey Transit station with frequent service into Manhattan. The building has three ground-floor galleries, exhibition spaces on its second floor, and several classrooms.

VAC-NJ's mission is to "foster stronger communities by empowering people to see, make, and learn about art." Museum staff advance this mission by offering robust arts education and art therapy that the museum brings to communities across Union County and Northern New Jersey with limited access to the arts. VAC-NJ supports social wellbeing by providing programming designed to enhance mental health, help individuals feel connected to a community, and educate participants in both arts-based and broader life skills.



## UNION COUNTY

The city of Summit in Union County, New Jersey, is an affluent suburban community and a 40-minute drive and 50-minute commuter train ride from New York City’s wealth of employment and cultural resources. Union County is home to just more than half a million residents, with a population that has grown by 5 percent since

2000. Roughly half of the county’s residents are Hispanic (30.1 percent) or Black (20.3 percent). The county has a median household income of \$70,476, compared to \$55,322 nationwide. Just more than 8 percent of families are in poverty, compared to 11 percent of families nationwide.

	Population	% Change in Population (2000–2016)	% White	% Black	% Hispanic	% Asian	% Other	Median Household Income	% Families in Poverty
United States	318,558,162	13.2	62.0	12.3	17.3	5.2	3.3	\$55,322	11.0
Union County	550,436	5.3	41.4	20.3	30.1	4.8	3.5	\$70,476	8.4

Compared to other suburban counties across the country, Union County residents enjoy elevated levels of overall community health and a high-performing K–12 educational sector. Union County fell in the top quartile on both the

Community Health and School Effectiveness Indexes.<sup>1</sup> Health Care & Social Assistance and Retail Trade are the two largest employment sectors in the county, employing a quarter of the adult workforce.

	Total Labor Force	% Health Care & Social Assistance	% Retail Trade	% Education Services	% Manufacturing
United States*	131,362,978	14.5	10.9	9.2	9.3
Union County	217,864	13.0	12.0	10.0	9.0

Data Sources: 2012–16 American Community Survey five-year estimates; U.S. Census Longitudinal Employer-Household Dynamics (LEHD), 2017.

\*Continental figures for total labor force include the 48 lower states and Washington, DC.

<sup>1</sup> Data elements included in the Community Health and School Effectiveness Indexes, along with measures for Union County, can be found in the Technical Appendix.

## SITE VISIT PARTICIPANTS AND DATA COLLECTION

In December 2019, the study team conducted interviews with four current VAC-NJ staff and representatives from five different partner organizations. Site visit interviews focused on understanding VAC-NJ's programming and partnerships that support education and health in Union County as well as VAC-NJ's institutional approaches to assessment and sustainability.

In addition, the following data were used to create the network map included in this profile:

- VAC-NJ 2016 Form 990
- VAC-NJ budget detailed revenue from grants, fundraising, and other sources
- VAC-NJ 2015–2016 Annual Report
- Program evaluations for several VAC-NJ programs
- Interview notes and related materials collected by the case study team

This site profile includes the following:

- A summary of select VAC-NJ programs and partnerships that support formal and informal education and the health and wellbeing of visitors and the community
- An overview of VAC-NJ's approach to sustainability and staff training
- A descriptive network map that illustrates the scope and variety of connections VAC-NJ maintains with local partners throughout the county and beyond

## KEY PROGRAMS AND PARTNERSHIPS PROMOTE WELLBEING BY ENHANCING EDUCATION AND FACILITATING SOCIAL CONNECTIONS FOR UNION COUNTY RESIDENTS OF ALL AGES

VAC-NJ helps promote social wellbeing through art classes and programming that serves its local community as well as through robust partnerships that help the museum reach at-risk and high-need populations. VAC-NJ on-site and off-site programming are both essential to the museum's success in fostering partnerships that increase its community impact.

A substantial portion of the institution's operating revenue comes from tuition derived from VAC-NJ's studio school, which provides arts instruction for local adults, teens, and children. Classes in the studio school range from digital media and fiber art to more traditional mediums such as painting, drawing, ceramics, and sculpture. Summer art camp classes for children

ages five through 18 provide instruction in a similarly diverse set of topics.

The opportunity to participate in studio art classes provides an important outlet for self-expression among participants. Many patrons have been attending VAC-NJ's paid studio courses for years, and these courses often serve as a means of preventing isolation among aging community residents transitioning through major life events (e.g., retirement, empty nesting). For local high school and middle school age students, the classes and summer camp offer stress relief and provide a vehicle for creativity.

VAC-NJ's studio art programming for local residents and its partnerships to reach

communities outside of Summit are mutually reinforcing. The popularity of tuition-based programs with the relatively affluent local population provides steady income, allowing VAC-NJ to take greater risks in piloting new programs to reach audiences outside its immediate area. And VAC-NJ's connections to incarcerated populations and to immigrants

and refugees also have the potential to highlight critical social issues for local residents. While the institution's marketing budget is mostly directed to promoting the studio school, VAC-NJ's staff and board state that they would like to be better known for success in getting contemporary art to people who otherwise do not have access to it.

## **PROGRAMMING FOR AGING RESIDENTS INSPIRES CREATIVITY AND PRESERVES SOCIAL CONNECTIONS**

VAC-NJ makes substantial efforts to reach populations who would be unable to travel to the institution. For example, VAC-NJ has a long-standing partnership with SAGE Eldercare, which operates day programs for older adults in Summit. VAC-NJ provides a trained art therapist who teaches an art therapy program at the center for residents struggling with dementia. The weekly classes give participants a sense of accomplishment and help restore self-esteem. The course's instructor described the importance of the program:

*"For people with Alzheimer's, their world keeps getting smaller as they remember less and less. But this art class gets people talking to each other, engaging one another. It may be fleeting, but it creates community to enrich their world."*

The program also helps participants communicate and connect with their families or other caregivers and provides a topic of conversation among participants. SAGE Eldercare and VAC-NJ hold periodic showings of the artwork. The program receives support by grant funds that were raised by the education and community engagement staff at VAC-NJ. Funding supports all material costs and the services of the trained and licensed art therapist.

The success of the SAGE Eldercare partnership inspired VAC-NJ to reach out to the state's Department of Veterans Affairs to offer art therapy to Veterans Administration (VA) clients with dementia or with issues related to homelessness. The VA program, which was still being designed at the time of the site visit, will include licensed art therapists and a robust evaluation conducted by third-party researchers designed to understand the impact of VAC-NJ's therapy on patients' mental, physical, and emotional wellbeing.

Seeking to identify other audiences who may not have access to art, VAC-NJ initiated a recent partnership with NeighborCorps Re-Entry Services (NCRS), a nonprofit that works to reduce recidivism for people who have been in jail in Middlesex County, which is adjacent to Union County. VAC-NJ worked with a professional artist to design a program that would keep within jail restrictions on materials and would be appropriate for a range of backgrounds. The resulting drawing class was designed as both a healing arts program to address participant's mental health and help incarcerated individuals regain a sense of dignity, and as a mechanism to teach useful skills that participants could use once they were released.

## **PARTNERSHIPS WITH SCHOOLS EXPAND ACCESS TO THE ARTS FOR UNDERSERVED STUDENTS AND COMMUNITIES**

The institution endeavors to serve communities outside Summit who have limited access to the arts and few opportunities to travel to VAC-NJ. Some of the institution's most robust and long-standing partnerships are with organizations in Elizabeth, the largest city and seat of Union County. The Elizabeth Public Schools (EPS) represent more than 30 languages and more than 80 countries, where 75 percent of students have a native or home language other than English. VAC-NJ is approximately 25 minutes from Elizabeth by car and more than an hour away by public transit. Elizabeth does not have any art museums of its own, but it does have an arts-focused public high school called Jefferson Arts Academy.

VAC-NJ sends teaching artists into EPS and offers special programming for EPS students at VAC-NJ, with transportation provided. Through VAC-NJ's partnership with Elizabeth's Jefferson Arts Academy, hundreds of EPS high school students come to VAC-NJ each year for multiple

visits as part of a school class. Based on the success of the high school program, VAC-NJ launched a one-day program to introduce EPS eighth graders to the museum and to encourage them to consider applying to the district's Arts High School, which has a higher graduation and college matriculation rate than EPS. A separate program engages EPS students who are learning English as a Second Language (ESL) to use art to improve their language skills and to process and express their own life experiences through art.

Many of these programs also leverage VAC-NJ's rotating exhibits, which feature contemporary artists across a wide range of media. A program for English Language Learners (ELL), for example, might participate in a tour of an exhibit that focuses on how artists use visual symbols to communicate meaning and tell stories. The lessons and techniques discussed on the tour then inform a studio class where participants imitate the techniques highlighted in the exhibit to tell a story in their own voice.

## **VAC-NJ'S ESTABLISHED POSITION IN THE COMMUNITY MAKES IT A SOUGHT-AFTER AND RELIABLE PARTNER**

VAC-NJ's approach to partnerships and programming largely follow a formalized process. Many of the partnerships profiled have been in existence for years and involve contracts between the partnering organizations. VAC-NJ staff believe that lasting partnerships need to be mutually beneficial. They cited the importance of discussing their goals with each partner early on in the relationship and periodically checking in on whether partners are getting what they want out of the program.

It is not uncommon for VAC-NJ staff to work hand in hand with partners to develop programming, identify funding opportunities, and jointly pursue grants. In its partnership with

EPS, for example, VAC-NJ identified a training program, CALTA21, that uses art education to support ELL. VAC-NJ staff helped secure funding for EPS and VAC-NJ instructors to attend CALTA21 trainings, which led to EPS and VAC-NJ launching a pilot program to serve ELL using the CALTA21 curriculum. Some of the VAC-NJ-led programming has been written into the EPS annual budget. From a practical standpoint, this has provided a sustainable source of revenue for the museum; from a partnership perspective, it indicates that VAC-NJ is deeply valued by EPS.

Partners lauded VAC-NJ for initiating joint programming and securing grant funding, both for pilots and for ongoing operations. They were

grateful for VAC-NJ's fundraising capacity and for the high quality of instruction provided by professional artists—not just volunteers, which many community arts programs depend on. VAC-NJ is widely admired for reaching a broad array of people, from young children to the elderly, and particularly for connecting with hard-to-serve groups.

Partners also described VAC-NJ as a “go-to resource” for the community. Although VAC-NJ is a driving force behind designing and

implementing programming, VAC-NJ staff also describe the museum's role as a support for primary service providers such as schools and health/wellness entities that more directly contribute to social wellbeing. VAC-NJ's role varies according to the type of program, e.g., on-site and traditional arts education compared to off-site efforts. The institution's small size is also an asset that allows VAC-NJ to be entrepreneurial in piloting different programs and partnerships.

## **STAFF TRAINING AND PREPARATION ENSURE HIGH-QUALITY PROGRAM DELIVERY AND ENHANCE COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS**

VAC-NJ has a small core of full-time staff that run the museum and the institution's programming. Many of the museum's core staff have studio art or curatorial training, rather than backgrounds in program delivery and management. To achieve VAC-NJ's mission, however, outreach and program-building skills are essential, and most staff members have learned them on the job.

In addition to the core team, VAC-NJ employs numerous professional artists to teach art skills on a part-time basis. Each teaching artist is an expert in their field, but some grant-funded programs require special training or certifications. For example, VAC-NJ's VA program requires a licensed art therapist with experience in trauma or addiction. Other grant-funded programs can provide special training for teaching artists, such as the CALTA21 partnership with EPS.

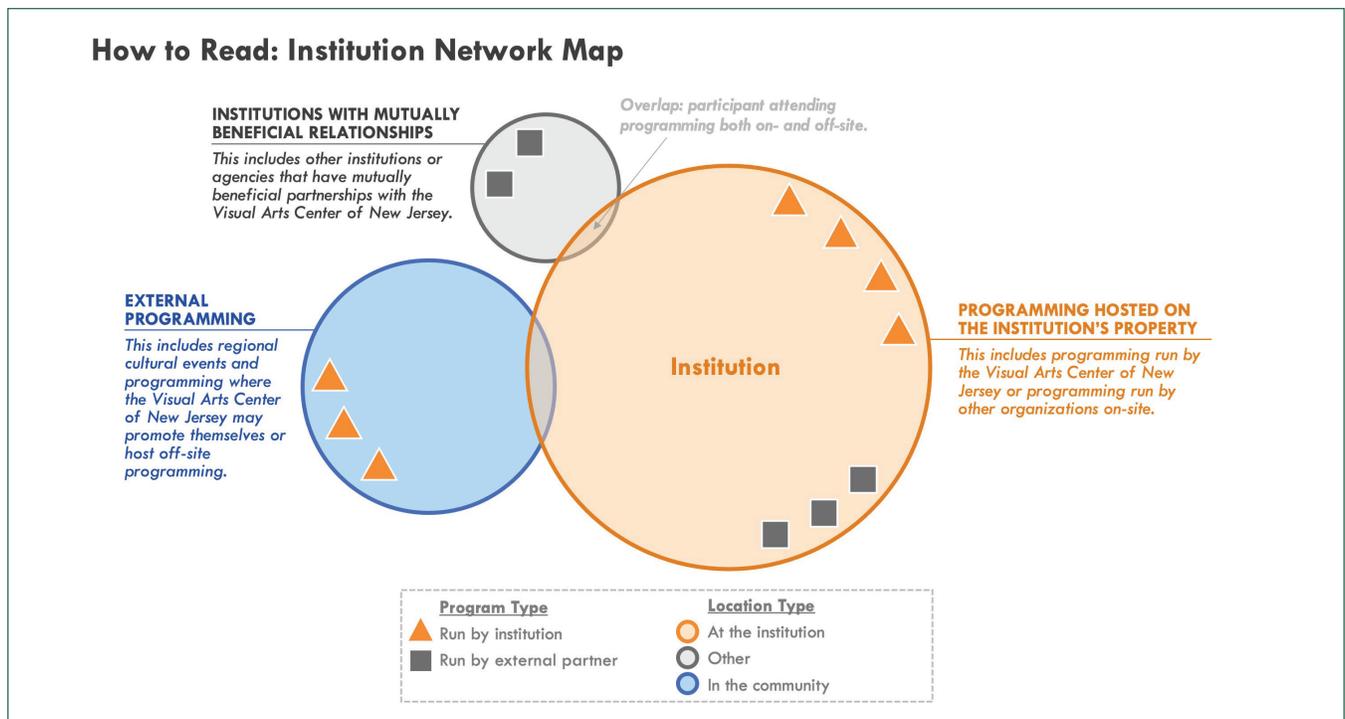
The skills of staff and teaching artists are instrumental in maintaining VAC-NJ's successful partnerships and financial stability. High-quality instruction by professional artists enables the museum to generate two-thirds of its revenue through tuition and other program fees. VAC-NJ maintains that same quality and professionalism across grant-funded programs as well, which has helped it secure funding for new and expanded programming. These dynamics create a positive feedback loop, as money raised through tuition and grants allows for investment in instruction. Staff members have nurtured a wide range of partnerships, tailored their offerings to engage different audiences, and have been savvy in building from success. VAC-NJ staff hew to VAC-NJ's mission of promoting contemporary art in ways that amplify its impact on the wellbeing of its patrons and the interconnectedness of the communities it serves.

# VISUAL ARTS CENTER OF NEW JERSEY NETWORK MAP

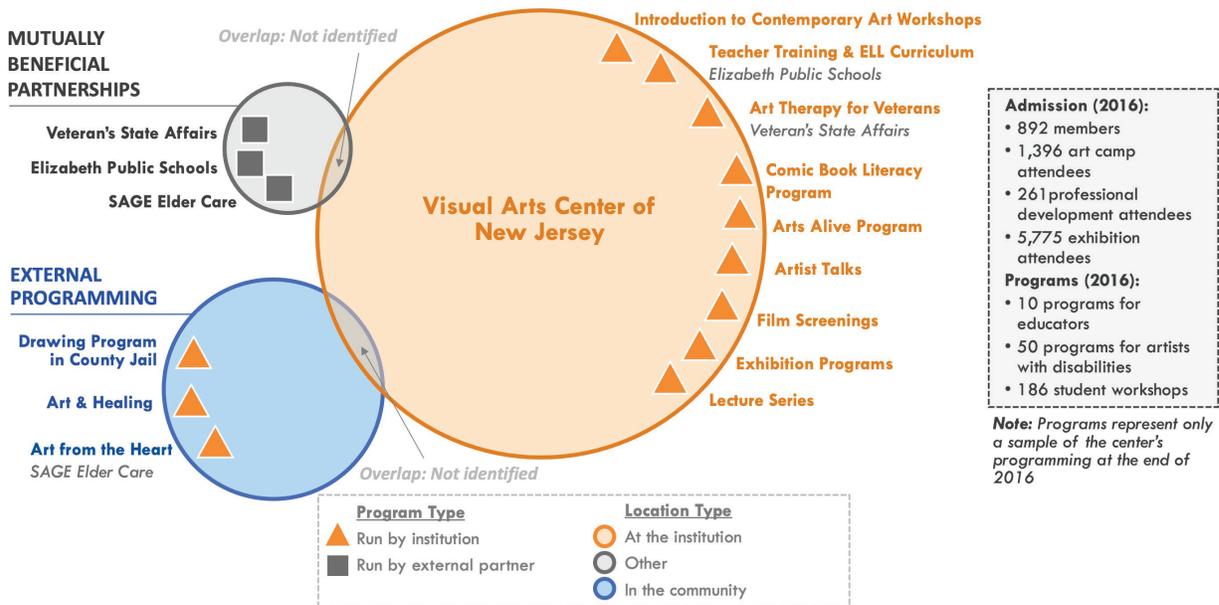
Using data provided by VAC-NJ, the study team developed a descriptive network map to highlight the different types of connections VAC-NJ maintains with other institutions in the local community. The map illustrates the relationships between VAC-NJ and those entities that offer programming at the museum itself and

those that support cross-marketing efforts or have reciprocal relationships with the museum, and it includes examples of off-site, museum-led programming. The map does not provide an exhaustive list of the museum’s programs but attempts to illustrate a subset of the relationships that the museum maintains.

*NOTE: The network map is purely descriptive. The connections represented on the map do not necessarily, and are not intended to, provide estimates of the duration, durability, intensity, or broader economic impact of the relationships between VAC-NJ and any single entity, or the broader network itself. The goal of the network map is to represent the range and diversity of different types of institutions that connect to the museum in different ways.*



## Visual Arts Center of New Jersey Network Map



The figure above illustrates a *sample* of the connections of the many programs offered across VAC-NJ's network. Within the orange circle is a small sample of programs, organized in terms of key program areas identified by VAC-NJ and conducted on the physical property of the institution—both programs produced by the institution and those produced by others. Within the blue circle is a sample of programs produced by VAC-NJ and offered off-site in the community. The gray circle represents a sample of connections with other regional organizations, which includes government partnerships.