

THE NASAA ADVOCATE

Strategies for Building Arts Support

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ADVOCACY FOR PUBLIC SUPPORT OF THE ARTS: A CIVIC RESPONSIBILITY

The best advocate for public funding for the arts is you—the staff and volunteer leaders, the artists and the audiences for your community's nonprofit arts organizations. You are the experts who can make the case for the public benefit of tax dollars spent on the arts. Whether talking to legislators in the state capital or the nation's capitol, you are the key spokespersons who can ensure the government's commitment to arts support.

The hometown point of view counts the most with politicians. It's the local voice that gets the message through to legislators. According to congressional staff in Washington, DC, programs with a grassroots constituency get priority attention. When legislators talk about the issues, their comments inevitably turn into a report on what the constituents are saying.

advocacy as a job requirement

The leaders of a community's arts organizations should be at the forefront of building public understanding and legislative support for the arts. Board members bring impressive credentials to the job: position and experience. Their standing in the community and their personal knowledge about the needs of the community add up to a powerful ability to persuade politicians and encourage others to take action on an issue.

It is a special responsibility of board membership to be an advocate for the organization's programs and mission, as well as for the arts in general. The boards of nonprofit arts organizations often include politically active community leaders who are able to connect legislators with the local arts constituency. **Advocacy belongs in the job description of every board member of every nonprofit arts organization.**

State Arts Agencies: Leadership in Arts Advocacy

State arts agencies have the tools advocates need to explain the public benefits derived from dedicating tax dollars to the arts. Data and information—the foundation for advocacy—is available from state arts agencies to build the case for public arts spending.

In addition to serving as the principal casemakers for public arts funding, state arts agencies employ other strategies and techniques—some of them detailed below—to improve the environment for advocacy and enhance the skills of arts advocates.

board members as advocates

Board members can articulate well the personal and public benefit of the arts. And when volunteers are the spokespersons, advocacy is a low-cost activity.

Much of what is called advocacy—talking about the value of public arts spending—is not considered lobbying within the federal tax law. Actual lobbying—contacting a legislator with the intent to generate support or opposition to particular legislation—constitutes a small piece of the advocate's job description.

As advocates, board members offer two things that legislators value: information and recognition.

Over a quarter of the state arts agencies encourage advocacy in the job descriptions of arts organization board members, and almost half require grantees to appoint a board member responsible for advocacy issues. In Montana, every organization requesting state arts funding must designate a specific person within that organization, or a board member, to serve actively as an arts advocate.

A number of state arts agencies provide advocacy training to grantees and others in the arts community. The majority of state arts agencies rely on their state arts advocacy organizations to perform much of the board training on advocacy topics, sometimes in collaboration with the state arts agency.

Several states require all grantees to write thank-you letters to their state legislators for the public funds that they receive from the state. The Nevada Arts Council requires its grantees to write their state and federal legislators to express appreciation for the support they enjoy from the state and the National Endowment for the Arts.

- **Information:** As a board member, be prepared to articulate the personal value and the public benefit of the arts programs offered by your organization. You have information your legislators need to make good decisions about public spending on the arts.
- **Recognition:** You and your legislator have the opportunity to make news together when a vote is cast in favor of public arts funding, or when grant money supported by your legislator is awarded to make the arts available in your community. At these announcements, say thanks and show your appreciation publicly. That's recognition.

every arts event is an advocacy event

Arts events offer opportunities for advocacy. With performances, festivals and exhibitions, the nonprofit arts community serves up what every politician wants: the chance to appear before a group of constituents. The opening night of every performance or exhibition, for example, can do double duty as an advocacy event when a politician is invited to attend.

Involving public officials cultivates their support. By attending an arts event, a politician becomes both personally informed about the importance of an arts organization in the community and familiar with the benefits provided by the organization. In addition, the legislator's friends and supporters who are present at the event—including board members, most likely—are identified as arts constituents.

A politician's presence at an arts event also provides an occasion to acknowledge that official's interest in the organization's activities. At the same time, the politician has a chance to demonstrate an understanding of arts issues. It is a perfect opportunity to publicly thank an invited official who has supported the arts during policy debates.

An invitation to an arts event can help to develop a relationship with a politician. Regular information can follow from the organization about arts programs and arts policy issues. Requests for specific action on legislation or policy questions then can be made in the context of an ongoing relationship.

Events sponsored by state arts agencies, including annual advocacy days and legislative luncheons in the state capital, are a component of successful advocacy strategies. The Vermont Arts Council hosts a statewide advocacy day each year to provide staff and trustees of arts organizations throughout the state with data and information on arts issues to bring to their legislators. The arts council also provides tips on being an arts advocate in the community.

crediting public arts support

Many state arts agencies require grantees to credit agency funding, with the aim of raising the visibility of public arts support to enhance advocacy.

In Delaware, all organizations receiving grants from the state arts agency are required to credit the agency's support in all advertising, news releases, printed programs or posters, and publicity. When organizations display logos of contributors, the logo of the Delaware arts agency must also be included. In addition, all grant recipients must electronically link their Web site home pages to the state arts agency's home page as a resource for additional information on arts activities in Delaware.

The Massachusetts Cultural Council and the Arizona Commission on the Arts require all grantees to adopt a crediting and publicity agreement for the promotion of public arts support. The Credit and Publicity Kit is a contractual requirement for all Massachusetts Cultural Council grantees, designed to help show the link between public support and the work done by grantees. The agreement outlines what the council requires in the areas of credit and acknowledgment, including the following:

- Credit must be given on the title page of all programs printed by a grantee in a type size not smaller than seven point. Also, the council must be listed in the donor category that is most appropriate to the level of financial support that the grantee is receiving from the council.
- Credit must be given to the council in printed materials (including newsletters, releases, announcements), films/videotapes and electronic transmissions (including Internet sites) of grantees regarding all activities to which council funds contribute.
- On television and radio appearances by representatives of the grantee, verbal credit must be given at least once during a broadcast to acknowledge the support the grantee received from the council toward its overall operation.
- Credit must be given to the council in all educational materials distributed in association with any council-funded program/exhibition, such as brochures, flyers, etc.

The kit includes sample press releases and articles, and other examples of how grantees can help inform people about the importance of public funding. One suggestion for publicizing grants is to contact a state senator or representative for a quote to include in press releases relating to programs supported with public funds. In addition, the kit stresses the importance of writing to thank the elected officials responsible for appropriating funds to the Massachusetts Cultural Council.

Suggested Reading

Smucker, Bob. *The Nonprofit Lobbying Guide: Advocating Your Cause and Getting Results*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1991.

Sparks, John D. *Best Defense: A Guide for Orchestra Advocates*. Washington, DC: American Symphony Orchestra League, 1995.

Lobby? You? Yes, Your Nonprofit Organization Can! It Should!. Washington, DC: Independent Sector.

Resources

Arizona Commission on the Arts
602.255.5882

Delaware Division of the Arts
302.577.8278

Massachusetts Cultural Council
617.727.3668

Montana Arts Council
406.444.6430

Nevada Arts Council
775.687.6680

Vermont Arts Council
802.828.3291

Past issues of *The NASAA Advocate* and information about state arts agencies are available on the NASAA Web site, www.nasaa-arts.org.