

**Assembly 2007
Peer Session Report**

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***Strengthening Relationships
Between State Arts Councils and the NEA
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It's a pleasure to speak with you today about strengthening relationships between your state arts council and the NEA. It's great to see some old friends here, and I look forward to meeting many of you in the next few days.

All of us in this room have one thing in common. We love the arts, and we believe that the arts are central to the fabric of our society. We are also willing to work on behalf of the arts – and most of you do so without compensation – because we can't imagine our lives without literature, music, painting, theater, and dance.

So I would like to spend our time together today imagining how we can strengthen our partnerships and work in tandem to promote and support the arts throughout the country.

Let me spend just a few minutes telling you about the NEA – who we are and what we do. We're the largest national funder of nonprofit arts organizations in the country. With a budget of \$124 million [now a budget of \$144.5 million], we give approximately 2200 grants annually to arts organizations in every arts discipline in all 50 states and U.S. territories.

Our mission is threefold: To support excellence in the arts, both new and established; to bring the arts to all Americans; and to provide leadership in arts education.

By law, 40% of our grant funds, or about \$41 million, go directly to State and Regional arts organizations through Partnership grants. These grants to State Arts Councils are matched with dollars appropriated by State governments. In FY 2007, aggregate State appropriations for the arts totaled \$362.7 million. With the combined State and Federal money, we can reach into more communities than any of us could reach alone. It makes inordinate sense for us to leverage the power of these dollars with similar goals, strategies, and messages. So I hope it will be useful to share information and ideas that have worked for the Arts Endowment in the past six years in order to strengthen the impact of our individual voices.

Everyone in this room is first and foremost an ambassador for the arts. So whether we are trying to inform Members of Congress, State legislators, or County Executives about public funding for the arts, we can best do it by demonstrating the value of the arts to the country or to our individual communities.

The Chairman has been very successful, I believe, in demonstrating to Members of Congress that the Arts Endowment brings value to their constituents. First, since 2002 we have conducted more than 50 grant workshops with Members of Congress to explain to leaders of nonprofit arts organizations how to apply for a grant from the NEA. We have done this in at least 22 states; many of you have joined us at these events. We have relied on our friends at the State and local arts councils to provide lists of potential attendees. These have been great opportunities for Members of Congress to meet their arts constituents, and to show their support for the arts. I know we have surprised several Members when more than 100 of their constituents show up on a work day. Often these constituents drive long distances, and always they are extremely grateful for this opportunity to learn about Federal funding for the arts.

Grant workshops only work if they are carefully planned, with enough lead time to elicit an excellent turnout and good publicity.

A second successful initiative is the program we call Challenge America: Reaching Every Community. This program ensures that annually we give at least one grant in every Congressional district. We have done this for the past three years, and we will do it again this fiscal year. This is another strategy that has to be planned early in the year and carefully executed. It isn't hard to find an

artistically excellent arts organization in every district, but since we don't always get applications from every district, it may take time and research to find that artistically excellent organization and invite its director to apply for a small, matching grant. This program ensures democratic access to the arts for all Americans. This initiative is especially important in reaching rural districts that don't know much about grantsmanship; and of course is appreciated by elected representatives.

Third is getting to know elected officials who have oversight of our work. Chairman Gioia has welcomed opportunities to meet with our appropriators and Members of our authorizing committees as well as newly elected Members of Congress who only know us by what they have heard about us. Again, preparation is paramount. We need to be able to explain what we do, and the results of the tax dollars the Congress has appropriated to us. This is also an excellent opportunity for us to learn about Members of Congress and the arts organizations in their districts.

Again, follow-through is critical. If we learn about a symphony orchestra or theater in crisis, or about its good work, we can establish a relationship with that organization, and perhaps give it the technical assistance or financial assistance it needs. Once again, it is an opportunity to provide value to an arts organization and to a public constituency.

In addition to personal visits, we invite Members of Congress to attend our arts events in Washington and arts events we are supporting in their districts. If we can introduce Members to their arts leaders, organizations, and audiences, we feel we are providing a useful public service to all involved.

A final effort I want to mention that has resonated with Members of Congress as well as their constituents and arts educators is the development and implementation of our National Initiatives – our model arts programs of indisputable artistic quality and merit. Created and implemented in partnership with arts organizations throughout the country, including State, Regional, and local arts organizations, these programs have broad national reach and a strong educational component. Let me mention a few:

In 2003 we launched *Shakespeare in American Communities* – the largest tour of Shakespearean Theater in American history. Since its inception, this program has brought live, high quality Shakespeare performances to 1700 communities in all 50 states. To date, we have reached audiences of more than one million including families on military bases; the productions we have funded have employed more than a thousand actors, directors, and crew members; and by May of 2008 we will have distributed free of charge 65,000 educational toolkits to teachers throughout the nation. Members of Congress may remember the Shakespeare course they or their children took in high school as well as the teacher who taught them *Romeo and Juliet* or *Hamlet*. Often it is this very same teacher who received our educational materials.

And let me mention one of our literary National Initiatives – *Poetry Out Loud* – a program we do in partnership with all 50 State Arts agencies. This initiative encourages students to learn about and recite great poetry from memory in front of an audience. Beginning at the high school classroom level, winners advance to school-wide competitions, then State capital competitions, and ultimately to the National Finals in Washington, DC. The National Champion receives a \$20,000 scholarship, and finalists and their schools receive monetary prizes as well.

Poetry Out Loud, a partnership between the NEA, the Poetry Foundation, and the State Arts agencies, provides schools with print and online poetry anthologies, an audio CD, and a teacher's guide. Members of Congress have enjoyed attending a luncheon on Capitol Hill with their high school students, teachers, and parents, and supporting this program.

All of these approaches I have mentioned earn strong support for the Arts Endowment at the community level and have helped to craft a new public image for the agency. By inviting arts organizations to our grants workshops so that they can learn about funding opportunities as well as how to navigate the application process, by bringing arts performances to underserved communities, and by providing free, high quality arts education experiences and materials, we have been able to build good will among the American people as well as whet their appetite for excellent arts programming.

Finally, I believe we have served the American people well by providing them with important research reports. Our groundbreaking report, *Reading at Risk*, alerted policy makers and the public to the steep decline of literary reading in this country – especially among young people, ages 18-34. Our very favorable report, *The Arts and Civic Engagement*, described the strong correlation between arts participation and civic engagement and suggested that Americans who read books, visit museums, attend theater, and engage in other arts are better citizens – they volunteer, perform charity work, and even register to vote at higher rates than those who do not participate in the arts. And finally our very sobering report, *To Read or Not To Read*, issued only last month, describes a strong decline in any kind of reading by adults, a decline in reading comprehension, and the serious, civic, social, cultural, and economic implications of these findings. When we can provide these important research reports to the public and to elected officials, I believe we are providing a very important public service for the Nation.

So how can you be good ambassadors for the Arts Endowment as well as for your own organizations? Inform your elected representatives about programs we have funded that are delightful to attend and important to your community; demand arts education in your schools; and bring the arts to your Capitol, to your Governor's office, and to City Hall, and invite your elected officials to your arts events.

Working together, I believe we can continue to bring the best of the arts to communities throughout the nation.