

Energize Your Advocates

Tuesday, July 19, 2011

Web seminar

Abridged Transcript

National Assembly of  
State Arts Agencies  
KNOWLEDGE ★ REPRESENTATION ★ COMMUNITY

**Energize Your Advocates:**  
**Strategies for Overcoming Advocacy Fatigue**

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# Introduction

**Jonathan Katz:** Hello, everyone. I'm Jonathan Katz, NASAA CEO, and it's my pleasure to welcome you to this seminar. Today's session will take on the topic of "advocacy fatigue." Arts advocacy can be hard work in any climate, but today's tight budgets and political turnover are placing even greater demands on the time and energy of arts advocates. Our session today will explore some solutions to that challenge by pooling ideas for keeping your advocacy network energized and motivated. We know that successful advocacy requires many partners working in concert. So NASAA is pleased to make this session available not only to state arts agencies but also to arts advocacy organizations and other colleagues from around the country. Welcome to all of you.

**Tom Birch:** Thank you, Jonathan. The kind of extended budget battles that we have come to expect here in Washington, D.C., in our work with Congress, and that so many of you experience in your state legislatures around the country can really test the endurance of even the most hardy arts advocates. I don't mean just those of us who confront the legislature on a daily basis, but also the grass-roots advocates who represent the forceful voice of the constituents who can make such a significant difference in the success of our efforts, when we are trying to sway the minds and the votes of our elected officials. To appear numerous and have our combined voices heard in our legislatures, we really need to keep the advocates at the grass-roots level engaged over the long haul, even when it seems that we are making little progress. This web seminar will explore ideas for keeping your network of advocates motivated and will try and explore some of the tactics that can help reinvigorate the advocates in your state.

We'll spend most of this hour speaking with three individuals experienced in working with legislators at the state and federal levels:

Bobby Kadis, chair of the [North Carolina Arts Council](#), is a longtime advocate for public support of the arts, for local communities in North Carolina and nationally with various members of Congress. Bobby is a former commercial real estate developer and a member of numerous prominent boards in North Carolina. He brings an influential public-leadership perspective to our discussion.

Jaime Dempsey, the deputy director of the [Arizona Commission on the Arts](#), leads the Commission's case-making and communications efforts, which include their recent "The Choice is Art" campaign. Arizona is a state that has experienced massive losses in funding for the arts in recent years, so she'll bring her perspective of what a state agency staff member can do to keep the field informed and mobilized to our discussion today.


Ann Marie Miller, executive director of [ArtPride New Jersey](#), is also with us today. We all know that the leadership of citizen advocacy organizations is a critical part of the mix, and ArtPride New Jersey is a great model of success. Under Ann Marie's leadership, ArtPride has been using traditional face-to-face advocacy techniques as well as a number of social media technologies that have allowed them to expand their ranks of arts advocates and keep them engaged and inspired in her state.


Now, let's go to the questions and start off our discussion.

**Today's Format**

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**I. Roundtable Discussion**

**Bobby Kadis**  
North Carolina Arts Council

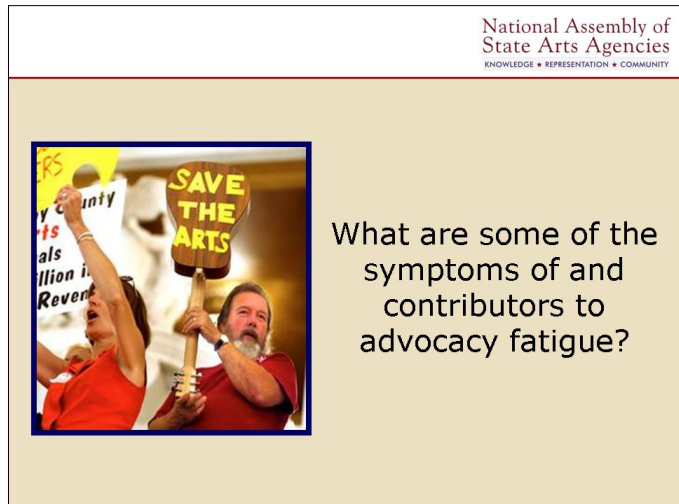
**Jaime Dempsey**  
Arizona Commission on the Arts

**Ann Marie Miller**  
ArtPride New Jersey

**II. Your Questions and Comments**

## Roundtable Discussion

**Tom:** NASAA sends out action alerts urging our grass-roots advocates to become more engaged with their legislators, but how do we know if any of that is actually happening? What we would like to ask our three experts today is what are some of the symptoms of, and contributors to, advocacy fatigue? Jaime, you have certainly had some tough hauls over the past few years; why don't you take the first crack at this. What does it look like when the grass roots really don't seem to be as engaged as they should be?



What are some of the symptoms of and contributors to advocacy fatigue?

**Jaime:** As a quick back story, Arizona has experienced one of the most significant budget crises in the nation. Public funding for the arts in Arizona was never robust even in our peak funding years, but over the last four years, the Arizona Commission on the Arts has lost 75% of our funding from the state of Arizona. As a state arts agency, at this time, we have limitations on the amount and kinds of advocacy that we can conduct in a visible way. We have a strong partnership with our state advocacy organization; in fact, their offices are right across the street from us. I have to say, however, as the cuts intensified for us and as things got wilder at the state legislature, we ran into some disagreements with our state advocacy organization. I think ultimately we are all on the same page about outcomes, but disagreements about approach really rose to the surface within the intensity of this budget crisis. That has been difficult, but we know that connection is really critical and are constantly working on that relationship.

I think we, as a state arts agency, have been most successful in maintaining a strong communications presence with our constituents and local press across the state. We have a great communications team, and they have actively sought out opportunities to place stories and engage with local press, both rural and urban, across the state. We have been praised for the consistency of our messaging as well as the constant energetic and forward-looking tone.

The hardest part for us has been maintaining a positive and effective relationship with our state arts advocacy group, because of the intensity of the situation. But also, as undercapitalized as we might think we are as state arts agencies, I think our state arts advocacy organizations are broadly and deeply undercapitalized, and I think that the expectations that have been placed on them in these times of crisis have been hard to meet.

**Tom:** Bobby, what does it look like in your state when the advocates aren't as engaged as we had hoped they would be? What are some of the signals that may indicate that to us?

**Bobby:** I think advocacy fatigue is when advocates are asked to do too much and too often. If all you need is a volume of traffic, it is easy to send out general requests to legislators. However, to be effective you need specific calls that do not happen every day and that don't ask too much. I think the main cause of advocacy fatigue is not being targeted enough.

**Tom:** I know that we try to be targeted, but we also want advocates to feel that the contacts and actions that they take are going to have some impact. Ann Marie, what does it look like in New Jersey?

**Ann Marie:** Well, being on the front lines, it gets very quiet when advocacy fatigue sets in. For that reason, we are very strategic about when we ask for help, and we try not to bother our advocates except when we have very important news to share. And whatever method you are using—phone calls, social networking, or whatever—when you don't get feedback you can tell people are tired. So we try to keep everything short, to the point and consistent. But most importantly, when we have some results to report we get that out to our constituents immediately, so that they do know that they are making a difference.

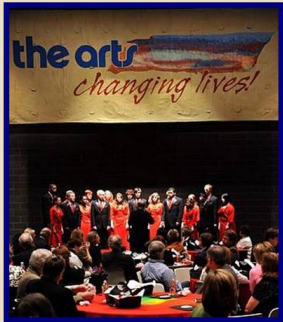
**Tom:** Do any of you have some sort of mechanism with advocates in your state that requires feedback, so that you can get a sense of whether or not something is happening?

**Ann Marie:** Well in New Jersey, when they use our on-line methods, I get a copy of every e-mail that goes out and I scan them to see who is sending them to get an idea of the diversity and where they are headed. At the same time, I make sure that it isn't always the same message that goes out, that we change them up a bit. I also look at the personal notes that people submit for ideas that are really compelling.

**Tom:** One thing that we want to flesh out is how to manage that type of advocacy fatigue and really manage our cadre of advocates so that they don't get burned out. Bobby, how do you handle that in North Carolina?

**Bobby:** It is important to keep the field knowledgeable and up to date with what is going on, even when you are not asking for specific actions or help. I think the field really appreciates being kept up to date on what is happening and what we are trying to do as an advocacy organization. Then when they receive requests, they know what is going on and don't need to be reeducated before they are able to contact legislators.

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What can you do to  
reduce or avoid  
advocacy fatigue?

**Tom:** Jaime, do you operate that same way in Arizona?

**Jaime:** We do. One of the missed opportunities in the last four years in Arizona has been not providing a context and not providing opportunities for victories for our advocates, and that has contributed greatly to burnout. When I was in college, working as a bookseller, Judge Judy came out with a book called [Don't Pee on My Leg and Tell Me It's Raining](#), and I think about that a lot in the context of our advocacy work. While I understand that we often have to position less than ideal outcomes as victories, in the long term a lot of our most dedicated advocates will get a sense of the trajectory of the effort and begin to question their participation if we continually ask them in an excited manner to help save critical funding, and the outcomes are loss after loss after loss. Eventually this reads as inauthentic and will wear away at the trust it is so important to maintain. I think that really contributed to advocate fatigue in Arizona.

Context is such a critical part of this, and interest groups in other sectors are doing it far more successfully than we are here in Arizona. We assume that our advocates are engaged and knowledgeable about the legislative process in ways that they probably aren't. And I think that we don't provide enough information on the long view of that legislative process. Advocates will start to tune out if it is something that they don't understand and we are not providing them with a way of understanding it. In some of these efforts to save critical funding, we could be talking about the same bill in 6 different actions or 10 different actions, and not providing the long view

and context can contribute to advocates' disengagement. They just don't have the time to catch up and understand. I think there is a way that we can succinctly provide some context for the actions that will help counteract that and that will leave us all better served.

**Tom:** This is a really interesting theme, keeping the advocates informed about the process. That way, when we send out alerts, it is seen as a step along the way and not the endgame. We can see some little accomplishments along the way and avoid some of the burnout. Ann Marie, do you handle things this way in New Jersey?

**Ann Marie:** We are currently starting to look at some longer-term strategies to assure some smaller successes, just like Jaime was speaking about. Our advocates are pumped up right now after an immediate and short-term battle; and we have an election coming up in the fall for the entire legislature and there are some opportunities. We have to grab those opportunities and try to find some ways to make people feel good about what they do. We try to offer pats on the back whenever we can and are looking for some ways of recognition at our annual Arts Day events.

**Tom:** I'm glad you mentioned that, Ann Marie. To provide some special recognition of those advocates who have made a special effort really gives the advocates an extra boost above and beyond the pat on the back. I'd like to go to the next question, because something you mentioned sparked something in my own thinking. When there is a crisis, people come together and there is a real sense of a need to be engaged. My sense is that a crisis in a way can be a positive thing; but once it is over, how do we maintain the interest of folks?



**Ann Marie:** Our legislators are fairly active this summer, because it was so controversial. With the election coming up this fall, we are going to try to seize the opportunity for our arts advocates to really make their points and drive them home in a positive way on some of the economic effects they are having. I think there is a lot of negative out there. That is really the only strategy I can talk about right now.

**Jaime:** Here it has been a consistent crisis for the last few years now. In the future it would be useful for us, now that we have been through a number of legislative sessions that have been burdened with trying to close huge budget gaps, to develop a plan for the session. Things can change any second or a crisis can occur, but there are some events within a session that are predictable. We are lucky enough to have a lobbyist working for the arts in Arizona, and she can anticipate some of the events that are likely to take place. It would be useful to develop a plan that includes some kind of advocate follow-up and engagement, and I don't mean some kind of workshop or training, but there are opportunities for us to communicate and engage our advocates. If a thoughtful plan was constructed, we could fall back on that after a crisis. One of the things that has been really difficult is that in a perpetual state of crisis and with an undercapitalized arts advocacy organization, the follow-up has been difficult to maintain. What we have seen happen is that advocates are rallied behind an idea and take action, but then the follow-through to communicate back with feedback and outcomes has been lackluster, because we are already on to the next crisis.

**Bobby:** You can sometimes view crisis as a real opportunity to focus advocacy. We had a situation in North Carolina where we felt our House had singled out our grants program, and that was a crisis that really brought together the advocates of the state and was managed well



by our advocacy organization. It produced a victory in this case; we were able to convince enough members of the legislature to overturn the House's decision. When you enjoy success it does bring back enthusiasm and bring in more people.

**Tom:** I am wondering what kind of strategies there are to keep those advocates engaged and interested, apart from a crisis and even apart from a legislative session. What sort of tactics and strategies do you put out there that keeps them engaged with their legislators?

**Ann Marie:** In our most recent crisis we noticed that our advocates were getting immediate responses back to their e-mails from their legislators, including the governor. We have never seen that level of dialogue before and we want to keep building on it. We are looking at a full year now of how to keep people engaged. We have tried social networking, which keeps people informed but also acts as a public value forum, where people can stay engaged with how the arts are important in their daily lives. We use Facebook a lot and we use our blog. Recently we have been blogging for the Dodge Foundation, so our audience is a bit different there as well.

**Bobby:** As chair of the North Carolina Arts Council, I have made it my business to go around and speak to some of our largest grantees and boards with two things in mind. I first want to make sure that they, as board members, know who we are. I feel like the staff knows who we are, but many of the board members may not. I also take that opportunity to make sure they understand the benefit of them belonging as individual members to the arts advocacy organization. It is an easy sell. I make sure they understand that we, and consequently they, get our money from the legislature and that we have to lobby in order to get our funding, and that it is our advocacy organization that coordinates that. I talk to as many board members of our grantees as possible.

**Ann Marie:** I cannot overstress the importance of that to advocacy groups. With a finite number of arts organizations in any state, having as many of them as you can who are grantees of arts councils as members, and their chairs and council members as active advocates, is extremely helpful.

**Jaime:** This is hard for me to say, but speaking from a state in crisis, our budget outcomes would probably have been the same regardless of the advocacy effort we mounted. Although there were a ton of missed opportunities, the state budget and legislative make-up here probably would have left us in roughly the same spot, regardless. Now when we are out stumping for our partner organization, the advocacy group, it is really hard for us to make the case to our grantees, when they have seen their grants reduced by so much, that they should reinvest or double down on their investment in the state arts advocacy group. That has been really challenging.



What helps keep your  
advocacy message  
fresh for your  
advocates?

**Tom:** I wonder if there is some way to reshape the message to give folks the sense of the value of being engaged. Often we turn to someone else, a legislator who is a great supporter, to speak to advocates or reach out. Sometimes getting a third party like that can have some positive effect. Have any of you had experience in leveraging legislators to keep the grass roots engaged?

**Ann Marie:** We have a tourism and arts committee here in New Jersey, and that has been helpful. It is not a budget committee, although some of them may sit on the budget committee. It is another forum to bring relevant issues to the floor, and it is often not as heated as when you are dealing with the budget committee in particular or during the budget cycle, since they meet all year. It is another great avenue from which to engage.

**Jaime:** One of the things we will have to do in Arizona is to grow and diversify our advocates and make better efforts to maintain and deepen their experience. Too often we are reaching into the same weary pool of advocates. That really speaks to the capacity of our advocacy organization right now, but I think if we are able to work in partnership there are opportunities to grow and diversify that base.

**Bobby:** I would agree to that, but I also think that when you indicate that you may have reached the same result without advocacy it indicates a weakness in the advocacy organization. Of course you need a success now and then, but when you take lemons and make lemonade and say, "If we had not tried, it might have been worse," you have to find a success every now and then to get people involved and enthused. It is difficult in the spot you are in, but somehow that has to be done.

**Jaime:** I apologize, if that is what I said it is not what I meant. I didn't mean to imply that if we had no advocacy in place we would have the exact same outcome. What I meant was that there was no way, given the budget crisis and the outcome of our legislature, that we were going to emerge from this crisis without significant cuts; the math just doesn't work.

**Ann Marie:** Looking to the future, the forecast isn't really positive, so we are looking for strategies that look for or create new opportunities. Otherwise, there is danger.

**Tom:** One thing we often think about is the message that we ask advocates to send. If it is the same old message, we are really contributing to the fatigue. Do you look for different ways to position yourselves, different public policy issues to attach yourselves to or new kinds of information? This has worked well in some places and I was just wondering if you have any experience with this?

**Bobby:** Well, our advocacy group certainly has more than one goal. Our financial position has certainly been very important; at the same time, they have been advocating on our behalf for arts education in our schools. And I think having multiple areas does bring in people who are more interested in a particular area than just getting specific dollars from the legislature.

**Ann Marie:** I agree. We have a program called [Arts Plan New Jersey](#) that tries to show how the arts are connected to many other public and private sectors. So we work really closely with our arts education partnership and a new group called [Creative New Jersey](#) that is looking at sustainability issues and economic development, among others. So there is an understanding that the arts aren't out by themselves and can just be cut off.

**Tom:** When we give advocates multiple ways to think about how the arts intersect with other aspects of public policy, we create different comfort zones for people to operate in. I think that is one way that we can maintain or encourage that energy level and be a voice at the table. So often we hear legislators say, "I'm not hearing anybody," and not knowing what is important from their constituents. Just keeping the engagement up is important.

**Bobby:** In that vein, I think it is very important for the advocacy organization to make advocacy requests as easy as possible for advocates. I think that is "101" strategy. You don't just put out there, "Contact your legislator and ask...." You have to make it easy for those out in the field to respond.

**Tom:** Let's discuss making it easy for them to respond. The number of contacts, especially e-mail, going to members of Congress has quadrupled over the last decade, yet the same numbers of people are there to respond. Let's go to our next question: What about the fatigue of the legislators when they keep hearing the same message over and over again from the same people? How do we know when we are in that kind of situation, where they aren't responding because we aren't communicating the way we ought to?



**Jaime:** In Arizona, our legislators have been clear that what was effective four or five years ago—e-blasts and phone calls through advocacy systems—has really lost its luster. They are inundated with e-blasts, calls and in-person protests. In response, our advocacy organization has taken what they call a "surgical" and "behind the scenes" approach to working with key legislators. I think that this was the right approach, especially when every other group has "released the hounds." But in a sense we have also missed an opportunity to engage a grass-roots, broad-based group and let them know what the advocacy group has undertaken and accomplished. I think when the work itself is too quiet and the advocates are not receiving appropriate follow-up messages, they begin to believe that nothing is happening. And when they take actions they are not really having the desired effect.

**Bobby:** I think one [way to curb legislator fatigue] is to target advocacy. Ask people to target legislators in the particular district they want to reach, so that it is not a mass mailing or e-mail. Instead we ask, say, the six people in the district specifically to contact their legislator and have some influence. I think all of these techniques should be used at some point. I would never underestimate the power of mass e-mailing and calls, even if all they do is total them up. When legislators say, "I didn't realize there were so many people interested in this," that is an outcome. I think the advocacy organization really has to call the shots.

**Tom:** I think you are right; it is really up to the organization leading the charge to understand where we are in the legislative process, what the situation is and what kind of response would be most effective from the field.

**Ann Marie:** It is the same here. We have legislative district teams as well. We have tried to diversify them a bit, making sure that there are trustees of those groups, as well as mayors and businesspeople, parents, students and in our case hoteliers. Making sure there is a broad range of options is always good.

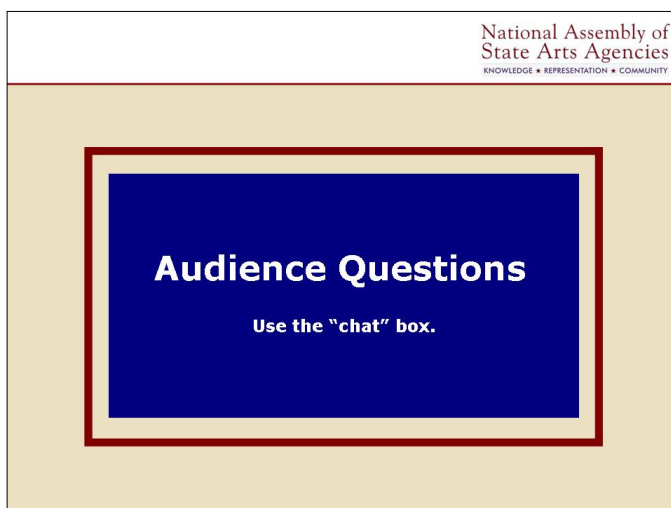
**Tom:** Well, we have heard some good advice here in terms of using different messengers and targeting and keeping our grass-roots people informed along the way. Let's take a few minutes for some audience questions. Eric, have we had any come in today?



## Q&A

**Eric:** Thanks, Tom. We have had quite a few come over the transom. Our first question is, How do you capitalize on the energy of younger people as advocates?

**Ann Marie:** We have a new emerging arts leaders chapter in New Jersey, so we are trying to make sure our young arts administrators are informed about advocacy as well. My assistant has been great in using all the social media tools. It is a different mind-set; those tools are kind of being used to build the army. There's a different kind of excitement and it tends to be more of a daily event rather than a crisis-oriented or action-alert-oriented phenomenon. There is more of a daily-maintenance strategy involved. We have built a different constituency, and it is our responsibility to use them properly. It is going to be a challenge, because we are unsure what kind of response we are going to get. It is a different mind-set for people who say they like you and whether or not they will do something when you ask. We are learning as we go, but we also try to take students with us to National Arts Advocacy Day and make sure that we recognize students through governor's awards in arts education and for their advocacy efforts in their schools and communities. We are now also recognizing parents who have helped bring arts activities back into the schools after they have been eliminated, so we are thinking bigger than in the past.



**Eric:** We have had quite a few questions come through on a central theme about advocacy coalitions, looking for pointers about working with other partners on issues like public education or economic development, or working together for media ads. Do any of you have experience with those ideas?

**Jaime:** There are discussions happening here in Arizona with groups under the umbrella of quality of life subsectors on several issues, like advanced political action through a pact and ballot initiatives for legislator-proof funding streams. These talks are ongoing, but are still really in their infancy right now.

**Ann Marie:** Our biggest success in New Jersey was with arts, history and tourism. That coalition really came together and helped secure the funding stream that we have right now. We have maintained that coalition to some degree, although it is no longer as strong, but we are all in it together and we realize that we have to depend on that for support.

**Eric:** Our next question comes from a state arts agency that is not allowed to directly advocate, to the point where they are expected to tow the line with the press, and although they have been able to leak some information to their state advocacy group, that puts a lot of pressure on that all-volunteer organization. Do you all have any advice on techniques or methods that they can use to help reduce some of the stress on that organization?

**Bobby:** Not quite sure I understand. We, in North Carolina, are an advisory board and are able to advocate, but we usually defer to the advocacy group. Our arts council staff may not lobby, but we as board members can, and as chair I try to make sure that all the board members are also members of the advocacy organization.

**Jaime:** I think this is really specific to the laws of each individual state. In Arizona, our public employees are not allowed to do any lobbying, except for the director, who is a registered public

lobbyist. We try to maintain a close partnership with our advocacy organizations. Our staff in terms of communication and press placement asks itself if it is about building public value for the arts or about educating the public about what we do and how we serve. If the answer to any of those questions is yes, then we are free to do it. In Arizona at least, the law allows us to educate, build value and encourage participation. The only thing we are not allowed to do is lobby for or against specific bills or speak out against specific cuts in the context of who proposed them.

**Eric:** We have time for one more question. If you are experiencing regular turnover in advocacy, from fatigue or other issues, how do you develop or maintain the context for advocacy when the experience or history with the issues at stake may be lacking?

**Ann Marie:** There are new people all the time and a huge turnover in arts-related employees. I don't even publish a board list anymore since there is so much turnover in that way. So, in some cases, you are starting from scratch and sometimes they are coming from a place where advocacy was strong. We keep our board members and arts organizations as informed as possible and try and maintain an e-mail list. I know one of NASAA's guidelines is that at least one board member at every arts organization is responsible for advocacy, so that they have something to report out at each meeting. So whether or not there is turnover in management, it is always on the agenda. We try to stress that a lot.

**Tom:** Thanks to everyone for a great discussion this afternoon. And thanks to you all for joining us today.

