

# NASAA Strategic Planning Forum Report: Associations Serving State Government

## Introduction

In the winter of 2017, the National Assembly of State Arts Agencies (NASAA) undertook a comprehensive planning process to assess its strategic position; explore key opportunities and obstacles; and revisit how NASAA can best achieve its core mission of strengthening state arts agencies. An explicit goal of this [multi-pronged process](#) was to reach beyond the organization's usual membership sphere, seeking ideas, advice and opinions from sources outside of the state arts agency network. A particular emphasis was placed on securing input from non-arts leaders, to ensure a cross-sector approach. The over-arching goals of this outreach were to gain new insights, reality-check NASAA's perceptions, and add breadth and dimension to the advice being gleaned from other stakeholders.

This report documents the results of one strand<sup>1</sup> of that planning: an in-person forum of professional associations serving state government. The meeting was convened on February 22, 2017 in Washington, DC. The forum was held to inform NASAA about trends emerging across state government, potential dangers on the horizon, and possible collaborative opportunities or new ways of thinking that could influence NASAA's future directions.

## Methodology

NASAA issued forum invitations to the leaders of 15 organizations serving state government. Individuals attending the forum were:

- Beth Armstrong, Executive Vice President, National Association of State EMS Officials (NASEMSO)
- Kelly Barsdate, Chief Program and Planning Officer, National Assembly of State Arts Agencies (NASAA)
- Pam Breaux, CEO, National Assembly of State Arts Agencies (NASAA)
- Michael Fraser, Executive Director, Association of State and Territorial Health Officials (ASTHO)
- Dr. Barbara P. Glenn, CEO, National Association of State Departments of Agriculture (NASDA)
- Erik Hein, Executive Director, National Conference of State Historic Preservation Officers (NCSHPO)
- Esther Mackintosh, President, Federation of State Humanities Councils (Federation)
- Ron Regan, Executive Director, Association of State Fish & Wildlife Agencies (AFWA)

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<sup>1</sup> Note that this report addresses just one strand of NASAA's planning process. Other strands (including other in-person forums, individual phone interviews, statistical benchmarking and an online poll) harvested knowledge from a variety of sectors: government, economic development, rural development, education, philanthropy and the arts. By combining multiple outreach methods, NASAA was able to secure robust multi-sector input that extended far across – and far beyond - the arts field.

This array of participants offered instructive cross-sector comparisons about public policy as well as the operations, scope, and perspectives of professional associations that specialize in serving state government.

The agenda (see Appendix) was designed to elicit information about key trends, programmatic innovations and policy priorities. NASAA engaged two private consultants (Lisa Mount and MK Wegmann from Artistic Logistics) to facilitate the forum, which lasted for two hours.

### **Highlights**

NASAA shares with its colleagues a position in the eco-system of its field that is partially hidden from view, working in support of sometimes-embattled state agencies. None of these colleague agencies have a major public profile, but all are part of the essential connective tissue in their fields. All of these associations provide an array of services to their members, including regular national convenings, and advocacy to and on behalf of the federal agencies that support their fields.

All conduct research designed to bolster the knowledge resources in their fields, which is often used to support state-level advocacy. However, the amount and kind of research varied among organizations, and NASAA's research function appears to be more robust than most. All of the organizations at the forum provided professional development support to the staffs of their member agencies. Finally, all of the colleague associations are grappling with the distrust with which the public currently regards government, at nearly every level.

NASAA appears to be distinct in its approach to advocacy from its peer organizations at this forum, working much more closely with its members on state-level advocacy than do the other forum participants. Other associations were more restrained in their engagement in state-level advocacy, in some cases indicating that an entity from Washington is likely to make situations worse, rather than better. NASAA does not have as strong a relationship with the Office of Management and Budget as some of its colleagues, although all present for the forum acknowledged that is a difficult agency to gain access to. NASAA's internal leadership experienced less churn than the peer associations and their fields, but there is regular leadership turnover within the membership and NASAA's Executive Director is newer on staff than most of the other associations present at the meeting; her tenure as a member agency leader, however, mitigates any newness to the organization.

In addition to sharing the common joys and challenges of working from Washington to serve the states and jurisdictions, NASAA may have opportunities for collaboration with its sister organizations. Working across sectors is a frequently cited goal of many national organizations in the arts and cultural field (and was emphasized in the interviews that are a complementary phase of this research); health, historic preservation, food and agriculture, and humanities are fruitful areas for cross-sector consideration. Rural issues are of significant importance to nearly all of the organizations that gathered in February, including NASAA. Finding a project – research into use of historic structures for both arts and agriculture, for example – might yield benefits in multiple sectors and serve as an entrée to NASAA members working across sectors within their states.

NASAA has a strong research orientation, and a track record of discerning field trends. When salary surveys and new member "boot camps" were noted as a gap for several of the associations, this illuminated a potential opportunity for fee-for-service relationships between NASAA and other organizations serving state government. Much would have to be done to determine the costs, benefits and revenue potential of out-sourced work beyond the arts field. A pilot project might reveal other areas where NASAA's robust research arm could bring much-needed earned revenue to the organization.

### **Comparing the Organizations**

All are membership organizations, and AFWA has individual "Alumni" members. Most of the organizations see significant churn among their constituent agency leaders, with an average tenures of 2-3 years in some cases; the Federation and NASAA had the least churn.

NASDA is a 501 (c) 6 organization; all the others are 501 (c) 3 organizations. All of the associations are officially non-partisan, and work hard to maintain their independence of party politics.

AFWA has been in existence the longest, since 1902, and has the largest jurisdiction – its membership includes the Canadian provinces as well as the US states and jurisdictions. The Federation of Humanities Councils has longest-tenured leader, who, like Kelly Barsdate, has been with the organization more than 20 years.

While NASAA does not see quite as high a degree of leadership turnover in its member agencies as its peer organizations, everyone is struggling with "churn." Equipping member agencies for inevitable staff turnover represents one potential area of service expansion.

A related opportunity arises from leadership turnover: as NASAA seeks to increase its contributed income from individuals, "Alumni members" hold potential as individual supporters – they know NASAA very well, have used its services, and understand the necessity of state arts agencies without the need for deep case-making.

### **Advocacy Targets and Federal Agency Interaction**

All of the organizations consistently lobby Congress on behalf of their fields. Additionally,

- NASDA, AFWA and NASAA interact with the Department of Agriculture
- AFWA, NASDA and NCSHPO all work with the Department of the Interior
- NASDA and AFWA interact with the Food and Drug Administration
- NASDA has gained a foothold with staff at the Office of Management and Budget, which yields regular updates on policy implementation and the budgeting process
- The Federation and NASAA have regular contact with the President's Committee on Arts & Humanities

## **State Government Trends and Their Implications**

All areas of state government are experiencing the impacts of shrinking state budgets, which sometimes manifests as travel bans or workforce reductions. State governments are seeking to increase their centralization, often in pursuit of efficiency; this changes the nature of constituent interaction and national representation as the leaders of agencies shift within state government. This can cause significant disruption when the appointed leadership of particular agencies have little to no background in the field they are tasked with serving and overseeing; professional development services best serve willing learners, and are often predicated on existing field knowledge. Unfunded federal mandates continue to increase, especially in the Agriculture and Fish & Wildlife sectors.

Term limits in many states yield regular turnover of policy-makers in state legislatures and governors' offices, placing an education burden on all of the associations' constituencies, as well as the associations themselves.

Finally, distrust in government is at an all-time high, in this volatile political environment. This has a variety of implications for associations – in supporting citizen advocacy and appropriately equipping members for policy and funding fights, to name just two.

### Implications of these Trends

These trends have yielded some significant changes in practice by the associations. More partnerships across sectors are in place or in process, designed to build support and knowledge across sectors. Partnerships are also useful to help address the gaps between the state agencies and their constituents, and 501 (c) 4 organizations are regular collaborators to boost the advocacy infrastructures in the states. The arts and humanities appear to have more robust citizen advocacy groups than many of the other associations' fields, perhaps because of past public battles at the state and federal level. Arts and humanities issues, moreover, may be slightly easier for the public to comprehend than, say, the intricacies of food safety or emergency medical licensure. Historic preservation, the only field in the room where the national association is bolstered by statutory requirements, is seeing an increase in threats to the goals of its authorizing legislation in a climate of antipathy toward regulations; this has sharpened NCSHPO's advocacy practices.

With an increase in the turnover of leadership in state agencies, the associations are increasing their one-on-one contact with new directors – a time-consuming endeavor. ASTHO has re-tooled their Executive Director training, with funds from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, and others are offering more regular advocacy and crisis management trainings. One implication for NASAA may be increasing the frequency of its "boot camp" trainings, making them annual events. This, too, may become a cross-sector earned revenue opportunity for NASAA.

### **Top Goals for the Next Three to Five Years**

In the aggregate, the associations share a number of goals for the medium-term:

- Building leaders
- Federal advocacy
- Equipping members with knowledge and skills

- Preparing to do battle

The first three of these goals are perennial "core" services. The last is not, and is, of course, fomented by the current political climate, and an unprecedented set of changes on all sides of civic discourse. In addition to the new administration's stated intent to reduce regulations and markedly change government, citizen advocacy on a vast array of issues has increased exponentially. If "protest is the new brunch," will citizen advocacy on behalf of any of the fields represented at this forum, see an increase? Or will these long-term issues be drowned by the noise of the moment?

The associations are also preparing their constituent members for political, and possibly legal battles, through knowledge-building, toolkits, and, in one case, adding attorneys. Member knowledge and skills building is often happening via partnerships, which for some of the associations present is a new development in their organizational practice.

The participants acknowledged the utility of multi-sector leadership development, so that networks and relationships are built by the next generation of field leaders. Among many practices, senior staff peer groups were singled out – building cohorts one layer below Executive Directors. Building leaders of state organizations in tandem with community leaders was another practice that enhances multi-level cooperation and networks.

On the policy front, while the current political environment seems to favor an increased emphasis on states' rights, the leaders in the room nonetheless espoused their support for cooperative federalism, with federal leadership for national programs working with state governments on implementation, supported by matching funds.

Advocacy at the federal level continues to be a top priority – no one wants their fields to have *less* money. NCSHPO saw major success with an appropriations and re-authorization bill passed at the end of 2016.

### **Successes**

The association representatives were asked about their recent successes. Some of these have implications for NASAA; they are phrased as questions, to spur its strategic planning process.

#### **NASEMSO**

- Interstate compact on licensure  
<https://www.nasemso.org/Projects/InterstateCompacts/documents/Model-Interstate-Compact-Talking-Points2013-04.pdf>
  - Some inter-state partnerships are happening (e.g., gulf coast touring). Is there interest in more, and can NASAA facilitate this? Is this a national fund raising opportunity? Is this a role better left to the RAOs?

#### **Federation**

- Pulitzer Campfires Project  
<http://www.statehumanities.org/about-us/our-partners/the-pulitzer-prizes-campfires-initiative-and-partnership/>

- Is this a model for NASAA? Who are some high-profile potential partners that could partner with multiple states on programming?

#### NASAA

- Practical Advocate
  - <http://www.nasaa-arts.org/Advocacy/Advocacy-Tools/>
    - Are there ways to animate these tools?
    - Are there collaborations across sector on advocacy? For example, might there be a way to aggregate the impact of USDA support for rural communities that are also engaged in placemaking and local arts development efforts? Or NCSHPO historic preservation in the arts? How might the benefits be larger than individual advocacy for our fields?

#### AFWA

- Blue Ribbon Panel
  - <http://www.fishwildlife.org/index.php?section=blueribbonpanel>
    - How might NASAA take advantage of its non-partisan positioning to bring together viewpoints that are both complimentary and in conflict about the arts. Could this be a public/private partnership that reimagines funding for the arts, as AFWA is reimagining wildlife conservation?

### **What Keeps Us Awake At Night**

We asked the association leaders to catalog what is worrying them – both in the future, and the present.

#### National Environment

The direction of the federal government is yet unclear, and the impact of the new administration on appropriations remains to be seen. If the Johnson Amendment is repealed, there will be a significant impact on political action policies (which could have benefits for the arts sector, as well as the other sectors represented). NASAA is concerned not only about threats to federal funding, which has been explicitly mentioned in administration-promulgated budget maps, but also threats to state funding if copycat measures are enacted at that level.

#### “What do we *really* know?”

In an information environment populated by “alternative facts” and junk science, real threats exist to organizations that are fueled by data and real science. This yields threats to food safety, for one example. Further, given the unsettled nature of administrative actions, there was a recognition that much of the citizen activism is in resistance to policies that haven’t yet been created.

#### Challenges Within and From our Fields

All of the associations recognize the necessity and challenge of staying relevant, and adding value to their respective fields. At the same time, a degree of independence is essential to defending credibility as non-partisan organizations – “protecting the brand,” as once participant put it.

With a high degree of churn, keeping track of who is new, and ensuring that association staffs meet the field is a constant pressure. Within each organization, and within their

constituent members' agencies, talent development and staff retention is another challenge.

Finally, no association represents a completely unified field (that's just a theory). Limiting the negative effects of in-fighting is an advocacy and an organizing challenge. And, given the constraints under which state agencies operate, they often look to the national associations to publicly declare what those agencies cannot, and take positions that may have deleterious effects on the national association.

### Organizational Challenges

With the share of federal revenue represented in this meeting ranging from 10% to 85%, financial stability for the associations is an on-going concern. The difficulty of operating with very limited federal support is counterbalanced by the difficulty of a high degree of reliance on federal funding: no one has it easy.

Partnerships were regularly cited as a way of expanding the impact for the associations; those present also recognized that partnerships take a great deal of work, not dissimilar to the fundraising cycle: prospecting, cultivation, partnership (solicitation), and stewardship.

### **Advocacy Issues and Conditions**

Overall, the decline in federal and state budgets for their fields is the primary concern of the associations present, and thus the first priority in advocacy. Some of the leaders present had a positive outlook on the potential decrease in federal oversight and increase in state autonomy indicated by the new administration and Congress, but all recognized that there is great uncertainty as to how new policies will be decided and implemented.

While NASAA and the Federation are already concerned about funding to the NEA, NEH and CPB, there will be an impact on other associations if they work with public broadcasting on content, advocacy, or promotion. Those with long tenure in the arts and humanities field referenced their past experience in fights to preserve the NEA and NEH (as well as CPB), which yielded a new energy and advocacy. This may be another such watershed moment.

Tax reform is of concern to the associations present, not only for budget impacts but also the impacts of proposed changes in charitable deductions. NCSHPO cited an example that rang true for many associations - regulatory reform such as attacks on the Historic Preservation Act threaten the existence of our fields. From the free-market side, one impact of the Dakota Access Pipeline conflict has been to strengthen tribal claims of historic significance, which has increased the amount of property under consideration for historic preservation and slowed approval processes by under-resourced agencies.

Rural services are on the radar of many of the associations present, including NASAA; as rural populations decline at a faster rate than rurally-designated land areas, serving the people as well as the places is an essential advocacy issue.

## **Advocacy Methods**

All agreed that members are the most effective and numerous advocates in every field. Thus, the work of the associations is often engaging and informing members to make them better advocates. Advocacy often happens in partnership, working with national service organizations and non-government organizations, as well.

- Action alerts, weekly call lists, and diving deeply into an issue, such as the farm bill, and become a subject matter expert are on the list of advocacy tools kept sharp by the associations.
- Several organizations cited the effectiveness of making direct connections with legislators, such as targeting and influencing committee chairs, and the NEA's ability to cite funded programs in every congressional district. It's all (and always) about relationships.
- Hired lobbyists are a component of every association's advocacy toolkit, often focusing on Appropriations committees and sub-committee. With the White House, arts advocates are developing a new strategy to leverage the Vice President's wife's position on state arts agencies, as she was a supporter in Indiana.

## **Strategies to Support Members at the State Level**

When asked about this, several associations immediately responded that they operate by invitation only, waiting for a concrete request to participate in state matters, and they do not take positions on state bills. One participant articulated the idea that the last thing a state fight needs is someone from Washington getting involved – "first, do no harm."

Members are better supported through knowledge-building and support, including:

- Providing tools and resources about ways to increase state funding
- Providing examples of successes in other states that can serve as models
- Researching and disseminating "benchmark" information about and to the field
- Building a set of prepared responses to the media on hot-button issues for state leaders to use
- Offering informal "hot-line" responses to members, without taking an official position on state issues
- "We have the backs of our members"

Members are also supported through the relationships that the associations are able to build, including national relationships – such as the National Governors Association – and relationships with various regional groups that convene annually. NASAA maintains a state legislative monitoring system, where the national office monitors trends, pro-actively alerting members about issues of which they need to be aware.

Finally, association members are often supported through chosen focus areas for the national organizations, such as rural development initiatives. Those present agreed that support for rural areas is both timely and important.

## **Arts Representation and Interaction**

The final question posed to those in attendance was whether they see any arts representation at national policy tables. Other than the Federation, the answer was no.

Those present did have some knowledge of individual arts projects that crossed sectors, including art at farmers markets, and historic preservation of arts spaces. This represents a potential area of continued work for NASAA, to integrate arts opportunities into the thinking of other association leaders, and their constituencies. Possibilities for cross-sector collaboration exist in populating panels at any of the associations' national convenings to ensure a presence outside the arts field, and Agriculture, Historic Preservation, Fish and Wildlife or Health sector representation at arts and humanities conferences.

Three examples were cited of successful cross-sector collaborations that proved to be mutually beneficial: Minnesota's Clean Water, Land and Legacy Amendment; Wormfarm Institute in Wisconsin; and South Carolina's Ag + Art Tours.

**Continuation?**

At the end of the meeting, the participants were queried as to whether they found the ability to meet and talk across sector lines useful and informative. The answer was a strong affirmative, and the potential for continuing dialogue is very strong.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Lisa Mount". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long, sweeping tail that extends to the right.

Lisa Mount  
Director  
Artistic Logistics

## APPENDIX: Forum Agenda

### Government Associations Forum

**Hosted by the National Assembly of State Arts Agencies (NASAA)  
Wednesday, February 22, 2017  
10:00 a.m. – 12:00 Noon**

*The doors will open at 9:30 a.m. Please arrive early to greet your colleagues and enjoy some refreshments prior to the session's kick-off promptly at 10:00 a.m.*

St. Gregory Hotel  
2033 M Street NW, Washington, DC, 20036  
Library Room | Lobby Level

### Forum Agenda

**10:00 a.m. Welcome from Pam Breaux, NASAA CEO**

Participant introductions  
Agenda review

**10:20 a.m. Group mapping**

Assessing the commonalities and differences among our associations

**10:35 a.m. State government trends**

What's changing about state government?  
How are those changes affecting your members?  
How are you, as a professional association, adapting?  
What is one brilliant thing you've done lately to serve your members?  
What are your association's top goals for the next three to five years?  
What keeps you up at night?

**11:05 a.m. Policy and advocacy trends**

With which federal agencies do you interact the most?  
What are your top two federal policy or advocacy goals?  
Do you have any recent advocacy successes to report? What are they?  
Do you assist your members with state-level advocacy? How?

**11:50 a.m. Bonus questions** (as time allows)

How often do you see the arts or culture represented at policy tables?  
Do you or your members interact with arts organizations or arts agencies?

**11:55 a.m. Wrap up**

**12:00 Adjourn**