

Three Simple Ways to Advocate for the Arts

Your voice matters in arts advocacy! There is nothing that captures the attention of elected officials more than the hometown constituent point of view. This means your voice—as an arts board member, administrator, patron or audience member—carries a special power that can boost understanding of the arts. This edition of The Practical Advocate offers three easy ways to voice your support for the arts in your state. None of them is complicated, and none involve lobbying or asking for money. All are easy and effective!

1. Congratulate the Winners

Federal, state and local election cycles ensure a continual stream of newly elected policymakers. Some of those newcomers may be unfamiliar with arts issues. Even for incumbents who retained their seats, a new term or a fresh legislative session presents another opportunity to make their mark on state policy. Continual outreach is needed to make certain that your elected officials recognize that the arts are important to you and to your community.

Once the legislators representing your state house and senate districts are sworn in, **drop them a note to congratulate them on their election success.** The note can be brief and it need not ask for anything. Instead, your goal is to establish contact and show that the arts are an involved part of the electorate.

It doesn't matter whether you share a legislator's party affiliation or voted for them. Hearing from you at the outset of a term will set a positive tone for future consideration of policies and funding decisions affecting the arts. Addresses can be found on your [state legislature's website](#). Or try [Cicero](#), an online database that provides state and federal officials' postal and email addresses, phone numbers, websites, and social media outlets.

An initial note has even more power if a follow-up communication reinforces the connection. **Good times to drop another line to your legislator are when you receive a grant from your state arts agency or launch a new program or initiative.** Use these occasions to describe the impact of the arts on people your organization serves.

What Should I Say?

Here is a sample letter of congratulation. While email is convenient, handwritten notes carry more clout. Customize your communication and enclose materials from recent arts projects.

Dear Representative Jones:

Congratulations on your election to the state legislature. As a resident and voter in House District 14, I want to thank you for your service to our great state and to Springville, a town we're both proud to call home.

I also am writing to express appreciation for the support the legislature has provided for the arts in Springville. I'm a board member of Vivid Youth Corps, which received a grant from the State Arts Council. The funds helped our students (mostly low-income middle schoolers) channel their energies into creative community service. They restored the fading trim on our downtown bandstand and completed a new mural for the Elm Park playground. I've attached a photo—just look at those kids grinning and standing tall!

I know you are working on many issues important to our community. The arts can help with those goals, especially improving education and attracting more businesses to Springville. I'd be happy to serve as a resource on these topics.

Congratulations again and best wishes for the legislative session ahead.

Sincerely,

Lashelle Gordon

2. Extend an Invitation

Arts events allow politicians to directly experience what your organization does. While witnessing the impact of your work firsthand, legislators will take note of the enthusiasm that your work garners among participants. They also may spot friends and supporters in the crowd.

- **Invite an elected official** (and their family) to attend a free performance, exhibition, community arts event or school activity.
- **Acknowledge** the presence of the official at the event.
- **Thank** the elected official for funding your state arts council.
- **Take a photo** that the elected official can display in their office or share on social media.

Invitations work especially well when your legislature is out of session, when many politicians return to their home districts. If your event includes any special activities for donors (such as a reception, backstage tour or introductions to performers), consider including the legislator. Focus on free events, since ethics regulations may restrict elected officials from accepting tickets with monetary value.



The West Virginia Department of Arts, Culture and History invites elected officials to visit sites participating in the state's VH1 Save the Music program. Middle schoolers enjoyed meeting State Sen. Patricia Rucker at this event.

3. Say Thanks!

Expressing gratitude is one of the simplest yet most effective ways to both advocate and educate. Thank-you notes create a virtuous cycle that helps elected officials to see the effects of public dollars on their constituents and to feel good about appropriating those funds to the arts. Whenever you receive a grant award from a public agency, take a moment to send a written thank-you note to the elected officials (local, state or federal) who appropriated those funds. Let them know:

- what the award was for,
- who participated in the activities, and
- how the funds benefited your larger community.

Make sure that multiple letters are sent. Ask your board members to write notes, and perhaps organize a communication from program beneficiaries as well. Your outreach will help to raise understanding of the impact of the arts while also developing rapport that can be an asset to collaborative policy work later on.

Engage in Ongoing Advocacy

When you follow the steps above you gain dual influence: you are a constituent with a relationship the legislator recognizes. This makes your participation in later advocacy efforts doubly meaningful. Here are pathways to further involvement:

- Sign up to receive regular communications from your state arts agency, and keep its staff apprised of interactions you have with elected officials.
- Most states have citizen advocacy groups that represent the creative sector. Stay in the loop by following your advocacy group's Facebook page, Twitter feed or email bulletins. Show your support by becoming a member.
- Attend your state's arts day at the state capital. Showing up shows that you care!



South Carolina arts advocates rally at the South Carolina State House for an annual advocacy day event hosted by the SC Arts Alliance.

National Assembly of State Arts Agencies

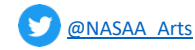
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