

National Assembly of State Arts Agencies

KNOWLEDGE ★ REPRESENTATION ★ COMMUNITY

No Advocacy Group? Let's Talk!

September 20, 2019

Facilitator: Kelly Barsdate, NASAA Chief Program and Planning Officer

Advocacy is a priority topic for state arts agencies. A roundtable discussion convened by NASAA focused on one specific slice of that equation: life *without* an advocacy group. NASAA chose this focus because:

- Lack of an advocacy group is a reality for quite a few state arts agencies. In a survey NASAA conducted in spring 2019, 23% of states reported that they had no advocacy group. Another 15% reported that their advocacy group was seriously vulnerable or on the verge of not functioning. In sum, 38% of state arts agencies are seeking advocacy solutions that do not depend upon an independent citizen group partner.
- History has shown NASAA that states in that 38% can thrive. But their success requires different solutions and different roles for state arts agency staff, council members and key local partners.
- NASAA has received several requests to create a space for members to explore ways of approaching do-it-yourself (DIY) advocacy. In response, we offered a roundtable discussion space at the 2019 Leadership Institute held in Providence, Rhode Island. More than 20 state arts agency staff and council members participated.



Key Discussion Take-Away

Even if an independent advocacy group doesn't exist, advocacy still has to happen. It's not an option for state arts agencies to opt out of advocacy leadership—because of the continual competition for resources, and because public support for the arts is never a "given." (Especially in our current political climate.) The question therefore becomes: What can a state arts agency do, within its limits and constraints, to ensure that advocacy still occurs?

The group referenced three key advocacy functions that every state can find ways to address, with or without the presence of a citizens' group:

- Advocacy **play-callers** direct a state's advocacy strategies and messages. In the absence of an advocacy partner, this function is often fulfilled by the state arts agency executive director or the chair. Hired lobbyists can help, but they will need state arts agency guidance in setting advocacy goals and objectives. Lobbyists also are unlikely to have grass-roots mobilization in their job portfolios.



- Visible advocacy leadership from state arts agency **council members** becomes essential in states that don't have a citizens group. When this capacity does not naturally exist, it helps to cultivate it proactively through training, governance documents and regular discussions.

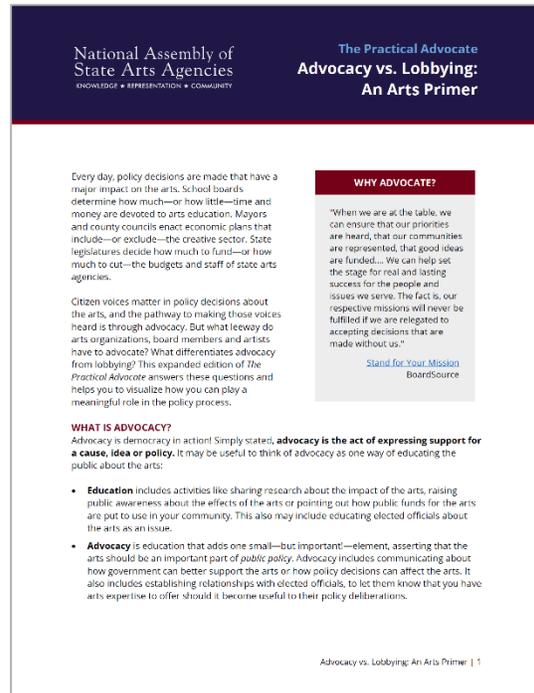
- Every state also needs a mechanism for activating visible support for the arts. **Mobilizers** rally the grass roots to call legislators, they initiate social media campaigns, etc. In several states that have faced recent legislative crises, this role has been fulfilled by a local arts agency. It helps if that local arts agency is located in a community that legislators perceive as politically important. State arts agencies may not be able to do this by themselves when a call to action requires constituents to adopt positions on specific legislative bills.

Constraints on DIY Advocacy

Members of the roundtable group experienced a wide array of constraints and freedoms in conducting advocacy. Some state arts agency staff have explicit cultural advocacy responsibilities in their job descriptions, in their agency strategic plans, etc. It's common for these members to interface directly with state legislators. Other states face more

constraints. In some cases department supervisors/secretaries restrict what state arts agencies can do or say. In other cases there are state legal restrictions on advocacy.

In navigating this intersection **it's useful to distinguish between lobbying and advocacy.** Lobbying is a direct request for legislators to oppose or favor a specific bill. Advocacy entails educating elected officials and the general public about the value of the arts and the state arts agency's accomplishments—and its need for resources. State arts agency staff may face constraints on lobbying, but many have more latitude when it comes to education or advocacy—and council members often have face even fewer restrictions than staff when it comes to advocacy. For more information, download [Advocacy vs. Lobbying: An Arts Primer](#).



Is an Advocacy Group Always Needed?

Advantages of having a citizen advocacy group can include:

- more capacity to advocate
- the ability to lobby free from state restrictions
- the ability to ask for more funding than the governor has recommended
- preventing the appearance (or reality) of state arts agency self-interest

However, roundtable participants cited several potential advantages of *not* having a separate advocacy group:

- Advocacy goals set by the state arts agency align with a state's cultural plan, which is developed with broader and deeper citizen input than most advocacy groups can achieve.
- Advocacy that's off-message, partisan or overly zealous can backfire on the state arts agency. Having the state arts agency set advocacy direction prevents this kind of accident.
- State arts agencies can ensure that advocacy efforts represent the state as a whole, not just the donors or organizations who hold the most sway with an advocacy group's board.

- Advocacy groups increasingly have missions that encompass a lot of activities (and fundraising goals) beyond advocacy. DIY approaches can keep state arts support at the core of public education efforts.

Practical Tactics

Useful tactics shared by the group included:

Getting Organized

- Hire an intern to coordinate advocacy work for the state arts agency: maintain a database, recruit grantees to contact legislators, etc.
- Convene leaders of key arts groups to develop unified messages and develop complementary strategies.
- If there are successful local advocacy efforts occurring in a city or county, try to amplify them to the state level.

Mobilizing Advocates

- Get mayors involved as arts messengers to the legislature.
- Send a team of people to national Arts Advocacy Day for training.
- Invite NASAA or Americans for the Arts to do advocacy training sessions at every statewide arts conference.
- Partner with the humanities sector or local United Ways for training.
- Piggyback advocacy events/sessions on to other major events happening around the state.
- Recognize leaders with an "advocate of the year" award.



Engaging Council Members

- Consider having your council develop and ratify an annual advocacy platform or agenda to serve as a guiding document.
- Try to include advocacy in your council member roles and responsibilities documents.
- Put advocacy on each council meeting agenda.
- Consider creating an advocacy committee of the board.

Interacting with Legislators

- One-pagers are key. Messages need to be concise and impact-oriented.

- Reach legislators at home when they are out of session.
- Convene an arts breakfast, briefing session or "lunch and learn" event while the legislature is in session.
- Consider creating an arts caucus.

Kick-Starting a New Advocacy Group

- Some state arts agencies cannot provide any funds to an advocacy group. Others can provide resources via grants and contracts for things like research, public awareness projects, etc. Even though a state cannot provide funds for lobbying, it often can provide funds for other educational activities if the group is a 501c3.
- When incubating a new group, selecting trustworthy people to lead the effort is of paramount importance.
- Proceed with caution: this can take a long time and be politically fraught, especially if there have been any advocacy missteps in the recent past.

Other Advice

- Build an advocacy strategy for growth now; don't wait until an advocacy group emerges "someday." Develop an offense; don't always play defense.
- Follow the money. Find cultural supporters on key legislators' donor lists and activate them to speak up on behalf of the arts.
- Think broadly. Not all advocacy objectives can or should be about the state arts agency's budget. There are other cultural policy issues that we can shape.

Photo credits: Page 1, Mississippi Arts Commission. Page 4, Anchorage Concert Association.