The COVID-19 pandemic is altering the landscape of traditional face-to-face advocacy in 2020. Regular legislative sessions have been postponed or suspended, and physical distancing has interrupted office visits and advocacy gatherings. However, putting arts advocacy on hold is not an option! The arts must be present and accounted for as important policy decisions are made for today and for the year ahead.

Arts advocates can be inventive about finding virtual ways to stay engaged with elected officials. Not only are such strategies valuable during a pandemic, they also are highly adaptable for rural states. Populations who cannot easily travel due to financial constraints or accessibility limitations may appreciate virtual advocacy strategies, too, so bringing advocacy online can make your cause more inclusive of all voices. This edition of The Practical Advocate offers pointers for ways that cultural advocates can transcend distances to stay in contact with their federal, state and local officials.

Represent the Arts at Virtual Town Halls

Even prior to COVID-19, many state and federal elected officials have been hosting video or telephone town halls to stay in touch with constituents. These events offer arts advocates an opportunity to stay current with emerging policy concerns, and can help advocates align the arts with state policy goals. Additionally, they offer a platform to remind elected officials that arts constituents are important contributors to civic dialogue.

**QUICK TIPS:**
- Take a little time to learn basic details about your legislator. Research the legislator's background, voting records and committee memberships. Online tools like Open States can be useful, but also review the legislator's bio, website and social media activity.
- Think through your talking points in advance and be brief with your remarks.
- If multiple people are attending, determine roles for all participants in advance.

Browse How to Effectively Engage Lawmakers at Town Hall Meetings and How to Get Results from Your Virtual Town Hall for more good advice on constructive participation in town halls.

Host Virtual Advocacy Days

Many advocacy groups have converted their traditional advocacy days to virtual convenings, and the arts are no exception. When thoughtfully designed, virtual advocacy webinars or video conferences can be used to share advocacy tips and brief participants on current issues.

Virtual platforms also can offer an effective vehicle for reaching elected officials and legislative staffers. Elected officials may be most responsive to online events that are focused on constituents from their own districts. Smaller groups also allow for deeper connections and more meaningful conversations. You can begin by targeting a few lawmakers (perhaps key legislative committee or caucus members) and working
with their schedulers to secure a commitment and select a time and date. Your next task is to prepare the participants:

✓ Coach your participants to convey a harmonized message focusing on a short list of priority policy objectives.
✓ Include a specific call to action.
✓ Whenever possible, include in your meeting someone with a connection to the legislator—a board member, donor or former colleague.
✓ Keep the sessions relatively short, since online attention spans wane quickly.
✓ Leverage social media to reinforce your messages and applaud good work done by elected officials.
✓ Make sure every participant sends a thank-you note afterward. This is a great opportunity to supply more information and keeps your relationship—and the arts—top of mind for busy lawmakers.

Personalize Your Communications

Of course, e-mail will continue to be an important vehicle for weighing in quickly when legislative timetables don't allow for scheduling group events. To make sure your contact about the arts has maximum impact, personalize your communications. According to the Congressional Management Foundation, there has been an exceptional rise in e-mail sent to elected officials, and many bulk e-mail campaigns have dubious impact on their intended recipients. Phone calls or thoughtful, personalized messages generally have more influence than a large number of identical form messages.

✓ Highlight what the arts contribute to your community before conveying what you need from government.
✓ Share short stories about why the arts are important to you and how your organization has been resourceful in response to adversity.
✓ Offer facts and figures to support your case.
✓ Be specific about the action you want your legislator to take.

Cultivate communications with legislative staffers as well as the elected officials to whom they report. Staff may be able to take more time to delve in to a particular issue and gain a greater understanding of your work, your needs and your policy proposals. With a little work on your part, they can become influential champions for your cause in city hall, at your state's capitol complex or in Congress.

LEARN MORE:

Being An Arts Ambassador
Californians for the Arts: How to be an Effective & Informed Arts Advocate
These 5 Tips Will Help You Become a Championed Arts Advocate
American Alliance of Museums: Communicating with Legislators
Congressional Management Foundation: Communicating with Congress
More NASAA Advocacy Tools

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES:

Fly-In Canceled? Here's How to Hold a Virtual One
How to Host a Successful Virtual Event: Tips and Best Practices