

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. As a result of COVID-19, elected officials and their staff are relying more on remote interactions with constituents and will likely continue virtual engagement in the future. 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

COVID-19 has accelerated technological trends that were already under way, such as virtual town halls and remote constituent meetings. Many elected officials are keeping their social media engagement at about the same level during the crisis, but some are significantly increasing their use of Facebook Live for town hall meetings with larger groups. 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. Based on extensive research on online and telephone town hall meetings by the Congressional Management Foundation and a team of academics, virtual interactions can be engaging and informative—for both constituents and members if conducted effectively—and can help foster trust. Additionally, they offer a platform to remind elected officials that arts constituents are important contributors to civic dialogue. Take these steps before a virtual town hall:

- ✓ Spend a little time learning 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

Quick Tips:

Check your elected officials' websites or [Town Hall Project](#) to learn about **upcoming events**.

Look for **open forums** or topics where an arts voice will be relevant.

Self-identify as a constituent and an arts representative.

to share advocacy tips and brief participants on current issues. 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.

Recommended Resources:

[How to host a virtual site visit for a member of Congress](#)

[Fly-In Canceled? Here's How to Hold a Virtual One](#)

[How to Host a Successful Virtual Event: Tips and Best Practices](#)

Personalize Your Communications

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](#)

[Congressional Management Foundation: Communicating with Congress](#)

[More NASAA Advocacy Tools](#)

While use of social media tools has increased in frequency, e-mail messages and phone calls are better platforms for understanding constituents' views and opinions. These vehicles continue to be effective ways to weigh in quickly when legislative timetables don't allow for scheduling group events. To make sure your message about the arts has maximum impact, personalize your communications. Phone calls or thoughtful, personalized e-mails 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 and how your organization has responded to adversity.
- ✓ Offer **facts and figures** to support your case.
- ✓ **Specify any 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.

