



NASAA CEO Address to Members: Our NASAA Story Unfolds

September 22, 2022

Hello, everyone! Welcome back to being in each other's good company—in person. Welcome back to assembling as a field of state, jurisdictional and regional arts agencies—a field that has accomplished mighty work since the last time we gathered in person.

In 1992 I had my first SAA [state arts agency] experience. I was in a graduate school folklore class on festivals and celebrations (gotta love folklore for that!), and Maida Owens, Louisiana State Folklorist then and now, was our guest speaker. Before she walked in, I had no idea a folklorist could be the state folklorist; I had no tangible idea what a state arts agency was. My state arts agency story and my NASAA story began unfolding from there.

The story includes some pivotal moments, like:

- How NASAA assists an SAA that was defunded by its legislature. That was in 1994 in Louisiana, and strategic assistance from NASAA helped to identify immediate life-support opportunities, as well as long-term strategies for a comeback.
- In 2005, in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, I learned firsthand how state arts agencies show up for communities and support them in times of crisis.
- And I learned firsthand how state arts agencies show up for communities when it's time to cocreate opportunities for recovery, revitalization and activities that strengthen the civic fabric of America's places.
- My story within our network continues to unfold, and so does yours. Your individual stories of life and work at state arts agencies are just as pivotal and remarkable; they tell of your impact on individuals and communities within your states. Your agency stories tell a more complete story of impact, and your NASAA stories are filled with connection to each other, and those connections to colleagues and the NASAA team help you become increasingly equipped to show up for the communities you serve.

As our collective story unfolds, I believe it tells the story of why America needs state arts agencies. Our collective story demonstrates why SAAs matter to America, as each of your agencies and you individually fulfill real needs in America's communities all year long.

As I think about your portfolio of work this past year, I see why you matter to the country.

- Arts and creativity make us stronger—and your work fuels that reality. Arts and creativity help people and places thrive and strengthen the tapestry of America's communities (and in so many ways: civic, economic, educational and more). You're ensuring that towns, rural and remote regions, and larger cities have access to the many benefits of the arts. [Tennessee's Rural Arts Facilities Fund](#) did just that this year, with an eye toward strengthening rural communities by expanding arts and cultural opportunities for underserved audiences, creating jobs, developing tourism and enhancing creative learning opportunities.
- We can't underestimate the value of providing shared experiences in communities and creating enlivened places for people to connect and reconnect. Communities need those shared experiences now more than ever.
- Just as important to the country, you are empowering good health, providing resources for the arts to help reduce isolation and contribute to physical and psychological well-being. [Wyoming's Vaccine Confidence Project](#) helped public health programs reach their goals with higher levels of participation and efficiency by utilizing the value of the arts to educate communities and build confidence in both COVID-19 and influenza vaccines. Artists were paid to make art that creatively communicates the importance of vaccination in protecting communities.
- [New Hampshire's Arts in Health Program](#) grants responded to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on veterans. One veterans home lost 37 residents to COVID in the span of one month. The grant assisted the facility in engaging a therapeutic artist who helped to rebuild a sense of community in the aftermath of such catastrophic loss.
- I encourage you to never lose sight of your impact on America. It's real and it's critical to the country.

- You're empowering heightened academic achievement, setting young people up for success. SAA arts education managers, through their Professional Development Institute, have been at work here in Kansas City considering strategies and tools to use their unique roles to reimagine and build equitable, enduring arts education ecosystems in their states. They're demonstrating that leadership comes from the entire SAA family. And there's no more important time for their work than now, considering the impact of COVID and lockdown isolation on our young people and their need for the cathartic benefits of the arts.
- America also needs inspiration. Although many folks don't pause to consider it, we absolutely need inspiration to awaken us to new possibilities and help us transcend our assumptions and our perceived limitations. At SAAs, you're fueling inspiration and innovation by smartly investing in the creative workforce. Look no further than [Colorado and California](#) to see workforce initiatives designed to bring artists back to work while simultaneously helping communities face pressing challenges in social service and health care.
- It is difficult for words to adequately express the hardships so many have endured during the last two and a half years. We all certainly know that in the face of hardship the arts are a force for recovery, understanding and healing. Your work at SAAs is empowering needed resiliency across communities all across the country. [Michigan and Ohio](#) offer inspiring examples. The Michigan Arts and Culture Council administered a grant program to strengthen communities by encouraging them to work collaboratively with artists and cultural organizations to explore local challenges and opportunities. Ohio's Arts Resiliency Initiative employed local artists in community based engagements to facilitate recovery and revitalization through art.

All of this work affirms that America needs SAAs. America needs you. And I stand at the front of the line to offer you gratitude for your service, especially for the difficult work you've engaged in to respond to artists, organizations and communities recovering from painful pandemic impacts. The entire NASAA team stands at the front of the line as your most enthusiastic cheerleaders; we're inspired by your service.

All of this is a part of our collective story. Our collective story is one that strengthens communities all across America. It's a story that reveals why the work you do each day matters. And it's a story that's grounded in and strengthened by

the power of association. You build your muscle and your power through gathering in community with the state arts agency family—the NASAA family.

Here's what else I see in our collective story.

Ours is a big, beautiful country whose beauty comes from the diversity we see across 56 states and jurisdictions. At state and jurisdictional arts agencies and alongside our close partners at regional arts organizations, you embody many ways of serving America and many ways of doing great work. Every state, jurisdiction and region has its unique environment; each has distinct demographics, creative attributes, authorizing environments and opportunities, and you customize your approaches in response. You'll see and hear NASAA giving greater voice to this reality in our new strategic plan (once it's approved by members on Saturday) and in our actions moving forward.

Across our work at NASAA, it's critically important to recognize and respect the differences that exist among state arts agencies. We serve the collective state arts agency family, and we serve individual state arts agencies, all with distinct operating realities. Allow me to share how this idea shows up at NASAA—particularly within our equity portfolio. As you already know, NASAA has prioritized equity, and our reason for doing so is distinct.

The public sector bears a special responsibility to help all communities thrive through the arts. In service to SAAs, NASAA prioritizes equity generally, and equity in grant making in particular, to help our members uphold your public policy purpose to help all communities thrive through the arts.

To do this work, we must recognize that there is no single way to advance equity. We must also recognize and respect the differences that exist among SAAs. These differences require members to tailor tactics to your own environments, and I'm grateful for this important work you're doing each day.

I'll also lift up that SAAs share a commitment to helping all communities thrive, and you activate the commitment through your services and programs. That commitment is shared, it's universal and it's grounded in good public policy—it's about service and representation for all. At NASAA we take our motivation from this place of good public policy to equip SAAs to advance this work.

As we at NASAA talk about this work, please know that we're also listening. Listening and learning are central to our diversity, equity and inclusion leadership

approach. We listen and we learn from our members, and members learn from and with us as well. This continuous cycle of communication will allow the work to be authentic, be relevant, and evolve—all critical for the work to be put into practice by SAAs and by NASAA.

The year ahead brings our association a new strategic plan and a new action plan. These documents will help our story continue to unfold. As always, our new action plan chronicles ample activities for the year ahead. However, our priority issues for next year include focused new work on advocacy, equity and resiliency.

Advocacy—Budget cutbacks and political threats may intensify in some states as federal pandemic relief ends and political polarization ratchets up. NASAA will help you prepare. As always we'll advocate at the federal level to continue securing funds SAAs need; in the coming months we'll navigate the postelection landscape on Capitol Hill. We'll also propagate effective advocacy research and messages that can be used by advocates at the state level.

Equity—Internally, we'll conduct a deep dive into our own policies and practices as we launch NASAA's equity audit. The board will be involved, as will the staff; we'll learn as we go and create space for members to learn from the experience as well.

Resiliency—We know SAAs are striving to help constituents adapt to postpandemic realities; that's tough work in itself. Yet, you our members are facing your own challenges with fatigue, burnout and workforce reductions. Folks are stressed. We'll be looking for ways to make all affinity and peer groups more supportive of the realities you face.

As we navigate next year and our next normal, always remember that YOU the members shape the future of this association. You write the story. You do so through your open and ongoing communications with NASAA. You do so through your daily work. SAAs are our primary stakeholders, and Team NASAA is proud to walk by your side as we collectively work to sustain the arts for individuals, families, communities, states and jurisdictions across America.

While we're gathered here in Kansas City together, let's also nourish ourselves in the SAA community. Earlier I referenced the power of association; I firmly believe it strengthens our practices at work, but let it also nourish us as individuals and as an SAA community of practice. Let it remind us that we can lean on each other here and throughout the year. This SAA support system can work past the boundaries of our conference. Lean on each other—and as always, you can lean on NASAA.

Before I leave the stage, I have shout-outs to share. First, please help me celebrate SAA executive directors heading for retirement later this year. Although part of me wants to hang on tight, my more enlightened half couldn't be happier for Colorado's Margaret Hunt, Nebraska's Suanne Wise and Vermont's Karen Mittelman, who have announced plans for their next chapters. Margaret and Suzanne are here, and ladies, if you're so inclined, please stand and take a bow! Everyone, please help me celebrate them and their service with a huge round of applause!

Second shoutout—Please help me express big thanks to all our regional arts organizations! They've come together as a collective and are hosting this evening's opening reception! Their collective support of our conference is deeply appreciated.

Third shoutout—because I like three's and the third one's a real doozy! Please help me thank our friends and colleagues at the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture [ICP] because they'll be hosting our next Assembly! Would [Executive Director] Carlos [Ruíz Cortés] and the team from ICP [the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture] please stand? We were incredibly sad to lose our 2020 Assembly in San Juan. With gratitude and excitement we thank you for stepping forward to host Assembly 2024 in Puerto Rico. We're so looking forward to it, and we'll keep everyone posted as details unfold.

Also, Carlos, we're especially relieved and delighted that your entire team is safe and sound after last weekend's terrible flooding. It's great to see you and be with you here today.

Mr. Chairman, that concludes my report to members. The stage is yours as we continue to move our collective NASAA story forward.