

NASAA 2025 Executive Forum | November 2025

Executive Director Peer Group Summary

During the [NASAA 2025 Executive Forum](#), state and jurisdictional arts agency (SAA) executive directors (EDs) and deputies met in separate groups to discuss current issues. The ED peer session was a closed meeting, attended only by state arts agency EDs and NASAA staff. To ensure candor and create a supportive environment for the discussion of sensitive topics, detailed notes were not transcribed. This document offers conversation highlights as well as notes on the facilitation structures used. For additional details on any of the topics below, please contact [NASAA Executive Advisor Kelly Barsdate](#), who can supply additional information or peer referrals.

Navigating the Current Policy Landscape

In a "Soft Shoe Shuffle" exercise, EDs explored the challenges and opportunities that the current political climate is presenting for state arts agencies. While no two states are alike, some recurring experiences were shared:

- Concern about future budget reductions
- Fear of political attacks or agency elimination attempts
- Governors or cabinet members exercising control over state arts agency funding and communications decisions
- Weaponization of artists and arts agencies
- Unpredictability of gubernatorial and legislative elections next year
- Navigating partisan pressures are affecting governors, legislators, constituents and staff
- Uncertainty surrounding the impact of federal policy and new legal rulings affecting federal funding
- Enthusiasm about emerging opportunities, especially around cross-sector collaborations with health and economic development partners

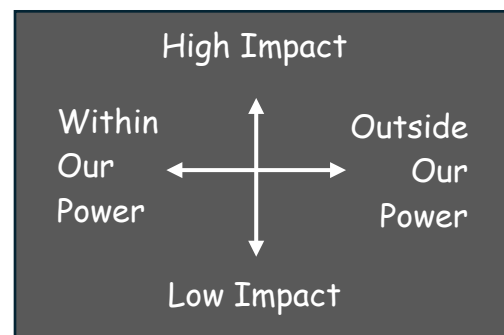


There was a shared sense that operating in a nonpartisan way in a hyper-partisan environment is increasingly difficult. Coping strategies shared by EDs included:

- Orienting to solutions rather than admiring the problems
- Identifying "left of boom" actions¹—things EDs can do to strategically position their agencies to avert or withstand various types of threats (political, financial, perceptual, etc.)
- Adapting communications and talking points to assert the SAA as an agency in which authorizers can have confidence
- Being proactive about adopting efficiencies and streamlining operations, in anticipation of state efforts to downsize government and cut "wasteful" spending
- Taking the opportunity of reductions and policy constraints to retool or sunset programs that originated long ago and may no longer be current or desirable
- Building relationships with legal advisors, to facilitate more informed and faster answers when compliance questions arise
- Putting the power we have to good use, rather than fretting about power we lack
- Leaning on the peer network of state arts agency EDs and NASAA as assets for reality-checks, tactical advice and moral support

Staffing

EDs discussed a variety of personnel and HR topics. On top of the ongoing, long-term challenges of managing specialized teams in a government setting, current events have intensified staffing pressures. Political stress, increased workloads, hiring freezes, and state return-to-work policies (eliminating pandemic-era teleworking permissions) all present recruitment and retention challenges for state arts agencies. At the same time, newer employees are bringing fresh eyes, fresh energy and new ideas to our field.



EDs explored these issues using a discussion matrix that invited them to classify factors according to their impact on state arts agency operations and levels of control.

¹ Commonly used in the military, cybersecurity and critical infrastructure fields, this term refers to preventive and proactive measures that leaders can take to avert crises.

Factors outside of a state arts agency's control include:

- Personal circumstances, goals or biases of employees
- Societal experiences/attitudes that employees may bring into the workplace
- Political worldviews and resentment that state arts agencies cannot engage in political activism
- Job classifications
- Limits that state government HR offices place on how public agencies will function (which often preclude employee-centered approaches)
- Union rules that limit corrective actions or terminations as well as rewards and performance incentives
- Unrealistic employee expectations around rewards and advancement
- Rumor mills
- The emotions of other adults

Positive actions potentially available to EDs include:

- Be clear about our public-sector and public-service missions. Stay firm that state arts agencies, as government entities, do different work than nonprofit arts organizations or social justice groups.
- Screen new hires for policy acumen and awareness of government constraints, to ensure aligned expectations at the outset. This is as important a prerequisite as database or spreadsheet skills. It may be more important than arts knowledge.
- Utilize temps and contractors when full-time hires are not possible.
- Document all procedures, to demystify operations and serve as accountability tools.
- Establish group norms for working together and negotiating disagreements.
- Conduct regular and well-documented performance reviews.
- Provide professional development on public service, public policy and state government.
- Get HR training (or hire an executive coach or management advisor) to serve as a guide for handling tricky personnel situations. Nobody teaches arts administrators how to manage HR and performance issues, but help on these issues is available.
- Encourage/facilitate new job placements for staff who are consistently chafing against government constraints.

- Allow staff to bring new ideas to fruition (within time and budget boundaries) through demonstration/pilot projects or new ways of working.
- Manage workloads through realistic deadlines and saying no to new undertakings, when possible.
- We can't give bonuses, but we can use experiential rewards (e.g., shared arts experiences, occasional early releases) to build staff connections and goodwill.
- Hold regular staff retreats to reward and rejuvenate teams.
- Get staff out into the field, to reconnect with the community importance of what state arts agencies support.
- Institute regular recognition practices. Include recognition from both within and outside the chain of command.
- Don't allow political "othering" by anybody. Insist on a truly nonpartisan office culture.
- Differentiate between policy and politics. Limit discussion of politics, engage staff on policy issues pertinent to state arts agency work.

Additional Topics

The peer session included small-group conversations on a variety of additional topics. Participants were invited to reflect on three dimensions of each topic: key questions, insights and next steps. Discussion highlights are synthesized below.

Advocacy Group Relationships

Participants compared notes on their experiences working with state arts advocacy organizations.

- Advocacy groups can be valuable partners in mobilizing support for state arts agencies. They are able to advance or oppose legislation and mobilize grassroots advocacy in ways state arts agencies usually cannot.
- Several EDs shared stories of highly productive and consultative partnerships with their advocacy groups.
- However, these groups may sometimes pursue their own legislative agendas (sometimes to the detriment of the state arts agency). EDs speculated that this

Topic _____

Key Questions

Insights

Action Steps

occurs in pursuit of quick wins, or to demonstrate their relevance to other constituencies who might offer sources of revenue.

- Not all advocacy groups behave in a nonpartisan fashion. Some are adopting activist stances on social justice issues, seeking "relevance, revenues and revolution."
- Several state arts agencies make substantial investments in their grassroots advocacy groups. These funds are for statewide services (convenings, research, professional development programs, etc.), not for advocacy. This type of support can strengthen the capacity of citizen groups.
- States having strained relationships with advocacy groups reported frustration about supporting entities that are actively working at cross-purposes with the state arts agency.
- It can be useful for EDs to build a small circle of allies with clear-sighted political acumen, to provide confidential counsel.
- In cases where grassroots advocacy partners are nonexistent or at odds with the SAA, state arts agencies may need to do intentional "DIY" advocacy (tracking the arc of legislation, building strategic relationships, disseminating info, etc.). Even if a state arts agency cannot lobby, it still can be proactive about educating stakeholders and creating the conditions for legislative support.

Access for All

State arts agencies strive to ensure full and fair access to arts opportunities, especially in communities that have historically experienced resource disparities. Federal restrictions and state laws both may shape how state arts agencies can approach equity work, but they do not alter state arts agencies' fundamental commitments to serving everyone. Action steps can include:

- Each state needs to assess its own environment in an objective way. What narratives will or won't work? Where does enforcement originate?
- We need to be willing to be flexible if we want this work to continue.
- It may be helpful to anchor the work in constituent needs, not political philosophies. One state arts agency, for instance, replaced a DEI committee with a newer Community Advisory Committee specifically tasked with understanding community needs. That group conducts critical research, and now the agency is equipped to address specific community needs that can be quantified.
- Define your legal boundaries and legal north stars. This may be liberating rather than limiting.
- Adopt a consistent communications strategy—across the whole agency, your website, plan and guidelines—that embodies the work without tripping triggers.

- Proactively track data about who is not applying to the agency.

Arts in Health

State arts agencies are pursuing collaborations that harness the power of the arts to help individuals and communities improve health outcomes. EDs mentioned work with veterans, older adults and rural areas as well as partnerships with nonprofits and government partners. Key insights included:

- Dialogue with potential partners in the health sector is needed to inform the design of successful arts in health initiatives.
- Medical professionals need training to understand the relevance and efficacy of arts approaches.
- Health partnerships require strong business development from both the health and arts perspectives, to ensure that resources can be scaled up beyond initial pilot efforts.
- Successful programs often require field-building and capacity-building efforts, not just grant dollars.
- Multiple states are pursuing work with Art Pharmacy as a partner.
- Changes in federal commitments to Medicare and Medicaid will affect state budgets in the future and potentially alter the landscape for health collaborations.

Poetry Out Loud

State arts agencies and schools are grappling with the Poetry Out Loud (POL) program for 2026, with state arts agencies fielding many questions from schools and teachers. There is frustration about the timing of program guidance as well as a revised anthology with many fewer poem selections.² Key questions among EDs were:

- Why are we still doing this program? To what end?
- What are the program metrics and impact?
- Is the program sunseting? Should it?
- Can the future be informed by feedback from students, teachers and SAAs? There is a strong desire for consultation moving forward, and for both POL program design and poem selections to be relevant to youth and responsive to teacher concerns.

² For legal reasons, the National Endowment for the Arts had to limit the anthology used for 2026 to public domain poems only.

Additional observations included:

- The resources needed for the program exceed what is available.
- The program is popular with Congress and some state legislatures.
- There are curricular connections with POL in some states, but not all. In states where POL does not connect to state standards, the program is extra work for teachers who have little time and few resources to devote to it.
- Some states are making the most of POL through partnerships with humanities councils, literary nonprofits, state poets laureate, etc. For them, it's very popular. In other states it has become a struggle to drum up minimal participation.
- It would be useful to have a survey or assessment of the perceived value of POL to teachers and students. It would be helpful to track results for urban vs. rural respondents, since the impact can differ by geography.
- Literary organizations might offer good counsel on how to design a poetry-based program for success.

Partnerships and Collaborations

This group included examples from the realms of humanities, state tourism, intragovernmental collaborations and joint initiatives with private foundations. Action suggestions included:

- Focus on collaborations where the SAA has a meaningful contribution to make (in terms of money, connections, expertise, etc.).
- Clearly define the purpose and desired outcome of each partnership. This is especially important when working with private foundations or nonprofits, which may hold different expectations and worldviews than government agencies.
- Use flowcharts to define roles and achieve clarity about the project scope and process.
- Establish a shared understanding of decision-making roles and authorities.

Council Engagement

Constructive engagement of their council/commission members is an evergreen goal for state arts agencies. This work is complicated by the political appointment system (which state arts agencies generally cannot control) and by council members who may not understand how public commissions differ from nonprofit boards. Action steps originating from this group included:

- Design council orientation/onboarding programs to emphasize the work of government and to differentiate SAA councils from nonprofit arts boards.

