

Deputy Director Peer Group Meeting Notes – June 18, 2026

Dora Shick (NASAA) welcomed a group of 19 deputy directors and introduced Kelly Barsdate (NASAA) to the meeting to share insights from a commissioned poll on conservative voters' attitudes towards public funding for the arts. The poll came out in late 2025.

Voter Opinion Poll Findings

Kelly Barsdate presented findings from the poll, which are summarized in NASAA's [Strategic Arts Messaging](#) briefing.

Anyone interested in additional information, please reach out to [Kelly](#) directly. She is happy to answer any questions and recap what was shared.

Questions

José Herrera (AZ): We currently don't have a veteran's program. Should we highlight the organizations that we're giving grants to that are working with veterans?

Kelly B: Absolutely. Find a way to tell the story about the arts and then connect the dots with how you are supporting the organizations that are doing that work. Every single state has a designated Blue Star Museum. Elevate those services. Also, check the Creative Forces grantees list. It's a NEA program administered by Mid-America Arts Alliance, but they have grantees in many states whose work can be highlighted as well.

Chad Buterbaugh (MD): Could you say more about why the economic impact arguments were not getting traction?

Kelly: While this is speculation, the pollster said that concern about government spending overshadows economic impact and spending arguments. A monetary path before establishing value is not effective. A hunch based on feedback from advocates is that there is skepticism about the [economic impact] numbers and it's boring because every sector creates jobs. We need to communicate our distinctive values and lean into the distinctive contributions of the arts. Elective officials are likely to be more interested in the economic impact than voters.

Liora Sponko (OR): Asked about the importance of relationship building.

- Cited a recent experience with a conservative lawmaker at an art reception in the governor's office who came because he was invited by another colleague in the Arts

and Culture Caucus. He seemed interested in possibly joining the caucus after connecting and the time spent building a relationship.

Kelly: The power of relationship building can't be overstated. Arni Fishbaugh, former ED in Montana, said she'd never go to a legislative office by herself. She would always bring three people: Somebody who could tell a good story, somebody who could speak knowledgeably to data, and somebody who carried the relationship.

David Markey (DC): Reflected on how the qualitative piece, the human touch point, becomes the entry point or the gateway to the quantitative piece.

Jocelyn Robertson (ID): This has confirmed a lot of what they've been experiencing in that leaning into the economic impact message has fallen flat in their state. Believes that the speculated reasons are true. For her state, they could never make a big enough economic impact that would compare to anything else, even if the impact was significant. They've been successful at developing very specific messages for very specific legislators or communities where they're talking about what they're doing in their area. But as everyone is developing messages with this new information, she would love to see what's working for others.

Kelly: Using the DD listserv to share communication strategies and messages is a great idea. NASAA also created a concise [message guide](#) to distill the top five messages.

Laura: Was anything asked about cultural districts?

Kelly: We didn't poll a specific question on that. The closest that we came was asking if it was appropriate for the government to spend money on local cultural activities.

André: In terms of the sample size of 2,000, what was the education level for them? Was it representative or skewed to one side or the other?

Kelly: It was tailored to mirror who voted Republican in the last election. 24% high school or less, 39% had some college and 37% had college or higher.

David Markey (DC)(chat): Could there be a national media campaign about the personal impact stories associated with participation in the arts?

Sylvia (chat): Maybe. But what an intriguing idea!

José: Sometimes I feel uncomfortable when I'm going to see an elected official and I'm using words that they like, words like heritage, that is a coded word for some individuals. How do you overcome that and still speak their language and use the terms that they want to hear so they can support the work that we're doing?

Kelly: I try to stand very firmly in the value that arts and culture are for everyone and SAAs serve everyone. We can speak to how *our* agencies preserve heritage and help communities celebrate their local culture. The mission to serve all becomes the North Star in these conversations.

Jocelyn: We talk a lot about heritage. We know that people are going to have a different interpretation of that word, but we use the word in support of our definition. We're supporting the heritage of all the people in Idaho.

- **Sylvia: What is your definition?**

Jocelyn: Idaho heritage is the heritage of all Idahoans, not just a specific subset of Idahoans.

Larry Morrissey (MS): Our Folk Arts Program was called the Mississippi Heritage Program, but we moved away from using heritage. We talk with more specificity of the art forms, so in the folk arts we talk about gospel, blues and bluegrass music instead of the broad term of heritage.

Kelly: Getting specific provides an attachment point. People can relate to the traditions without debating definitions of culture and heritage. Either direction of talking about the big umbrella of serving everyone or getting very granular may resonate well.

Chad (Chat): In Maryland we run a heritage awards programs accepting public nominations in three categories: people, places, and traditions. It's helpful bringing the public in to help define what heritage is.

André: What are some of the next steps or things that NASAA and the board plan to do with these findings? Is there going to be more ample discussion during the Assembly?

Kelly: We are propagating these ideas intentionally starting with SAAs and SAA staff groups. We emphasize different things with different groups based on their roles. We're having these conversations with PIOs, Deputies, EDs, and CMs. We're trying to equip messengers in 56 states and jurisdictions to talk about their work a little differently.

We're also pushing advocates to adopt this, so we've done in-depth briefings with the Creative States Coalition (CSC), a network of state and local arts advocates with about 200 organizations in the coalition. We're having conversations about leading with taking the electoral map seriously. When they issued their latest public arts funding talking points, it echoed a lot of NASAA's language.

Pam has also had conversations with the federal Cultural Advocacy Group about how to adapt these messages. When doing our policy and positioning, we're structuring testimony around these messages.

André: Are there any plans to polling again after the midterms, or doing something similar in 2029, after the general election of 2028?

Kelly: Would not rule out another one in the future. Doing these things from time to time becomes a body of knowledge that is informative. It allows us to be able to equip people in positions of influence to protect and sustain the arts at this moment, which is part of the strategy.

State Updates and Check-in

Sylvia welcomed Rachel Morgan from the Nebraska Arts Council.

Chad: They wrapped up their state arts conference, Maryland Arts Summit, which had a lot of programming around arts education, creative placemaking, and cultural plans. They are also currently pulling together some data for an inquiry from the General Assembly about their policies around operating grants and why they've put modest restrictions on organizations that are receiving legislative line items beyond their Arts Council grant since adopting an equitable funding formula five years ago. MSAC was also asked to plan programming for the Great American State Fair and were able to recommend 16 artists.

Jocelyn: They are in the middle of America 250 celebrations, including their Cowgirl Congress gathering. Next week is their Blackfoot Ranch Rodeo and Indian Relay Races event in collaboration with Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage where they will have a big exhibition from Cowgirl Congress as well.

André: Received \$65 million out of a \$200 million investment from The Lilly Endowment. So, they've been working on developing that program and had 15 regional areas develop arts and culture plans for it. They are now in the process of making deliberations to present to the Economic Development Board to make recommendations.

Sylvia: What kind of conversations might you be having right now about the OMBs proposed overhaul of the uniform guidance?

Laura: They are a little overwhelmed and have three ongoing audits now: Texas DOGE Audit, an internal IT audit and an upcoming sunset audit. With that going on they aren't spending time on potentials right now.

Sylvia: Shared that the National Council of State Legislatures has a pretty good summary on this. NASAA is planning on sending something out to keep people in the loop. :

<https://www.ncsl.org/fiscal/federal-reforms-to-grants-and-assistance-regulation-what-states-should-know>

Sylvia: Who is coming to the Assembly in October?

Sara Leonard (RI): Their latest count includes 14 folks planning to come from their full-time staff, long-term temps and their council.

Jocelyn and André shared in the chat that Idaho and Indiana will also be there.

Wrap Up

Sylvia closed the meeting by sharing that the next meeting is going to be:

August 20th at 10:00 a.m. PT | 11:00 a.m. MT | 12:00 p.m. CT | 1:00 p.m. ET. We also hope to see everyone at the Assembly. Notes from today will be posted on the DD corner.