



Chair and Council Member Peer Session

October 4, 2012

Notes

[Agenda](#)

As advocates and ambassadors, council members have a vital part to play in conveying the value of government's investment in the arts. The Chair and Council Member Peer Session allowed participants to talk candidly about advocacy with experts who gave insight into how to be most effective when meeting with members of Congress and other elected officials. Participants reviewed strategies for effective communication and discussed tools and tactics for developing initial conversations into more substantive relationships.

See the [Chair and Council Member Peer Group roster^M](#) for the full participation list.

Session Facilitators

Ben Brown, chair, Alaska State Council on the Arts

Becky Quinn, council member, Alabama State Council on the Arts

Malissa Feruzzi Shriver, chair, California Arts Council

Challenges

Participants shared the biggest challenges they face in their states:

Advocacy

- Being continually proactive with our advocacy and in ongoing dialogue with legislators; how can we keep momentum after a big push?
- Preventing advocacy burnout
- Finding more champions for the arts
- Creating advocacy strategies that are effective with legislators in a jaded authorizing environment
- Creating effective marketing strategies and messages
- Working with senators who may support the arts generally, but do not support *public* funding for the arts
- Working to get another budget increase and following up on the work we've already done

Arts Education

- Increasing arts education opportunities in and out of school
- Maintaining a statewide commitment to the arts instruction in the classroom—difficult because of Race to the Top education reform
- Helping kids travel to arts events

Working with Stakeholders

- Dealing with difficult and unsupportive legislators and local elected officials
- Teaching legislators about the connection between the arts, arts agencies and economic development
- Getting other departments in state government (commerce, tourism, transportation) to understand the value of the arts and to help promote them
- Working with the business community and teachers' unions

State Budget Concerns

- Dealing with cuts to local arts agencies and community organizations
- Facing budget elimination annually with a Tea Party governor

Arts Advocacy Organizations

- Dealing with a difficult relationship with the arts advocacy organization
- Working with an arts advocacy group that is well meaning but lacks firepower
- Formally creating a state advocacy organization

Other

- Working to achieve a broad base in arts council nominees
- Getting members of the commission together in a big geographic state
- Helping artists get into politics
- Figuring out the best place for the agency within state government

An Insider's Guide to Advocacy That Works

A panel of advocacy experts and former congressional staffers offered their perspective on how advocates can best establish and maintain relationships with legislators and their staffs. Participants asked questions and shared their own advocacy successes and challenges.

Panelists

Ben Brown, chair, Alaska State Council on the Arts; former campaign staff to Senator Lisa Murkowski, Alaska

Isaac Brown, legislative counsel, NASAA; public policy advisor, Edwards Wildman, LLP; former legislative assistant to Congresswoman Jan Schakowsky, Illinois

Jonathan Rucks, director of advocacy, Pathfinder International; former legislative assistant to Congressman Jim Oberstar, Minnesota

Mollie Van Lieu, advocacy specialist, Parent Teacher Association; former legislative assistant to Congressman Todd Platts, Pennsylvania

What makes a congressional visit successful?

Think of your first meeting as a blank slate and as a new relationship. Don't assume the staff you're meeting with know your acronyms or subject as well as you do. The first meeting is an introduction in which you talk about the return on investment in the arts. Talk specifically about their districts and the good things happening there. It's easy for people to forget how budget cuts are personal. Tell them how cuts affect their constituents.

Most staff members are from the legislative district, so begin by asking them where they're from.

Ask members to be on the Congressional Arts Caucus. They are not obligated to vote for the arts, but they'll get more information by being on that caucus.

Respect their viewpoint, even if you don't agree.

Learn about the legislator and staffers and their families and interests. For example, how do their kids interact with the arts? Lead with letting them talk.

What are some tips for following up on a visit?

Work to build a relationship where the staffer looks to you as the content or substance expert. Anytime there is news that affects your issue, reach out to staff and let them know.

Not knowing the answer to a question is a gift because it allows you to follow up with a staffer. Also, try to get time with the legislative staffer in their district, not just on the Hill.

Participant suggestions:

- Look for ways to offer something to a legislator, not just ask for something.
- Send a follow-up letter that thanks them, recaps things you agreed on and states what you'll do next.
- Give staff the story you want them to write.

Handwritten notes are really nice, but send substantive information via e-mail, so it can remain a resource to staffer.

Mention your lobbyist when you follow up.

If a meeting doesn't go well, use it as an opportunity to follow up thoroughly and kindly.

Remember that snail mail to congressional offices can take time to arrive, so send an immediate thank-you note via email, followed by a handwritten note.

What are some of the worst things advocates can do?

Sending mixed messages; to avoid this, synthesize your priorities with your arts council and advocacy organizations so they don't conflict

Playing "stump by the staffer" by using acronyms

Assuming that staffers are stupid if they're young (and many staffers are young)

Telling people they're idiots and being hostile

Pitting causes or organizations against each other

Is it more important to develop a relationship with district staff or go to Washington?

It depends on the office. Some district staffs are great, and cultivating those relationships is important if they are trusted by the D.C. office. Try to invite staff and legislators to events you're holding at home. Ask the district staffer whom you should call in D.C. There's no wrong answer to this question, but some offices won't put a premium on the district office and vice versa.

If we have strong state legislators, could we encourage them to talk to their federal colleagues?

Lots of organizations do fly-ins to D.C., but at the end of the day you're trying to influence your state members. Typically state and federal legislators are advocating for different things, so that probably won't get much traction.

It could be part of an approach, but not the main approach. You could mention it if you know the two have a relationship. However, don't ask your state legislators to lobby on your behalf.

What are statutory lobbying limitations?

Your council will have its own lobbying guidelines, and there are federal guidelines, too. As long as you do not advocate for or against a particular piece of legislation during your conversation with your legislator, your meeting is considered educational, rather than lobbying, and will not jeopardize your organization's 501(c)(3) status. Such lobbying is permitted under federal law, but if you speak to a congressional office and urge them to vote a certain way, that conversation would trigger the "substantial" test under the IRS tax code, which permits a 501(c)(3) to lobby only 20% of the time. Should this apply to your organization, NASAA can provide more guidance.

The lobbying culture on Capitol Hill is no longer about gift giving or special treatment, and that behavior is not expected. The days of wining and dining are over.

Participant suggestions:

- Find out who funds your legislators and bring those donors with you on your visit.
- Host fund raisers for both sides of the aisle at an arts space. It's an effective and economical way to get people to your venue.

Can we talk about a meeting with an advocate that really made a difference, positively or negatively?

It helps to make a political issue very personal. One group had pictures showing who would benefit and why the legislation mattered to them. They asked staff members about themselves and their degrees. Personalizing the interaction is key.

If your meeting does not turn out as you expect—or even if it falls through and gets cancelled—don't let your disappointment get the better of you. As an advocate, keep in mind that staffers and legislators are very busy and be understanding about unexpected demands on their schedules.

How do we keep a staffer or legislator on point during the meeting?

Make the meeting as personal as possible as fast as possible. Make it about them being responsive to their community.

Try to find a connection between the congressperson and your cause—find the "in."

What are some things we shouldn't do?

Don't push staff for an answer, because they can't always make a commitment.

Don't try to talk about campaign politics.

Don't talk about other congresspeople—this puts staff in an awkward position. Conversations with staff are on the record. Stick to areas of commonality and don't talk about wedge issues.

Don't threaten, complain or be self-pitying.

How do we develop an approach for a successful meeting? Do we need to identify a specific outcome?

Remember that *time* is of the essence for staff members and legislators. Don't just say hello or be unprepared. Think ahead about your long-term strategy and have an objective.

Provide background information before the meeting.

Come in with one or two asks or issues for the meeting. Come in with a plan. Have someone be the lead. Sometimes introductions in large groups take up too much time and may not be the best idea. Make sure your message is different from other people's messages. Anecdotes and numbers specific to your district help get your message across.

Develop a pre-plan, a meeting plan, and a post-plan.

Don't bring more than five people with you, so that the conversation is manageable.

Let staffers know you've got this issue covered on the local, state and national levels—don't ask them to do it.

Talk about how your agency leverages federal money. If you get a federal dollar, talk about how much state, local and private support that generates.

Think about how you want the staff member to talk about you, and use those messages in your conversations.

When staffers have so many messages coming to them, what kinds of filters do they use in deciding what to relay to their representative or senator?

Staffers consider what impacts the district the most. If the issue is jobs, tell the congressperson how many jobs come to the district. Share both numbers and stories.

It also depends on time lines. If a funding bill or decision is coming up, that might drive more communication.

How can advocates do their homework about a staffer before they meet?

It's helpful if you have a dedicated person on your staff to help do background research. Otherwise, see what's on-line. Keep the legislator's perspective in mind. Are they from a rural or urban district? Do they have a history of arts support, or a lack thereof? Look at www.votesmart.org as a primer to find out their boss's record.

Staff don't necessarily hold their boss's views, so don't be aggressive. If a congressperson has a bad record on an issue, a staffer will be nervous. Position yourself as a resource to a staff member.

Is it appropriate for the advocate to acknowledge that "We know your boss doesn't support this, but here's what we want to share"?

That would be fine. Approach it as, "We know your boss voted this way, and we just want to talk to you about our experience."

Keep in mind that Capitol Hill is very transitional, so some staff you work with now may work with you in a different office later on. You don't want to alienate anyone.

Participant suggestion:

- Remind staffers and legislators that 40% of NEA money goes to the states. Don't assume that people remember and understand this.

What can advocates do to stay in touch with staffers?

Forward articles or something else relevant to your organization—not just when asking for something, but any time. Send periodic personal e-mails (though not every week).

Ask if they want to receive your newsletter.

If you hear there's a new staffer, try to meet with them early on because they'll remember you.

Follow up on votes. Let staffers know when you like how their legislator voted.

Different offices schedule things differently, so send invitations to both the home and D.C. offices. Also, copy staffers when you contact schedulers. Even if you submit a scheduling form through their website, follow up with the staffer. Then the staffer can then follow up with the scheduler.

Help legislators identify things that they can do for their districts. The NEA match is one of these things, so give them this opportunity.

Participant suggestions:

- Set up a thank-you program—you can never thank legislators (and staffers) enough.
- Even if the legislator can't attend an event, you can still make a pitch for NEA funds during the event and thank the legislator anyway. Then you can let them know you thanked them.
- Ask your grantees to write thank-you letters to legislators.