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WHAT DO I SAY? TIPS FOR ADVOCACY MEETINGS.

NASAA staff have conversations year round with state arts agency leaders and their colleague advocates who are preparing for meetings with elected and appointed officials. I'll share with you some of the most common questions we're asked and I'll offer responses.

Question: I have a meeting scheduled with a legislator. What should I say?

Response: Montana Arts Council Executive Director Arlynn Fishbaugh points out that effective advocacy in her state is based on relationships, relevance, and return on investment. This provides a useful principle for organizing your approach.

- **Relationships:** The first rationale any advocate should present on any issue, including the arts, is "I am a constituent of yours, it's important to me to be represented on this issue, and I'm asking you to [name your specific request]." The second rationale is that a constituency exists and is available. "I am not alone. Many of us who care about [name the GCA and perhaps a couple of public benefits it provides] have organized to support the arts. We discuss how to support leaders who speak up for us. We hope you will [continue or agree] to [repeat your request]."
- **Relevance:** An important aspect of your relationship with a public official is exchanging what each of you thinks is important. Find out what issues, relationships or policy concerns are priorities for your representative, then connect the arts to those issues.
- **Return on Investment:** While relationships are probably the most powerful driver of legislative decisions, most elected officials will need a fact base to help them justify support of your agency. Show them a list and a map of grants and services provided in their district to their voters. Be prepared to share statewide facts about jobs created, funds leveraged or tax revenues generated by your constituents.

Question: We know we are going to be asked why government should fund the arts when schools, health care and food programs are being cut. How can we best communicate that the arts are worthy of a public investment even in hard times?

Response: Investments in the arts yield returns in jobs and tax revenues that increase a state's capacity to address the challenges of economic recovery, education, health care and poverty. In other words, *the arts don't diminish a state's resources to address these other issues—they contribute resources to the cause.* Here are three reasons:

- **The arts are a source of jobs and economic activity**, which yield taxpayers and tax revenues. Research shows that public grant making in the arts supports a not-for-profit arts industry that generates far more tax revenues than the government invests. The \$9.1 billion in state government tax revenues from this activity is more than 30 times the allocations of all state arts agencies combined. This return on investment is one reason the National



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Governors Association Center for Best Practices, in [*Arts & the Economy: Using the Arts and Culture to Stimulate State Economic Development*](#), concludes, "The creative industries offer numerous benefits to state economies, and states have an opportunity to both improve livability and boost state and local economies by investing in the arts and culture."

Increasingly, creative industry research documents jobs and economic activity across the for-profit and not-for-profit arts sectors.³ These jobs and tax revenues are stimulated by public investments in the film, music and media industries; place-making, neighborhood improvement and arts districts; cultural tourism, festivals and competitions; and other activities that broadly promote participation in the arts. Your legislators will be particularly interested in the return on the public investment in their own districts.

- **The arts represent resources that improve learning and school systems**, as well as personal and community health, and the skills to earn a living. Learning and participation in the arts have been linked to higher standardized test scores⁴, substantial savings in medication expenditures for older people⁵, and lower prison return rates for parolees⁶. By providing these educational and social benefits, the arts create wealth and free up funds to address other priorities of government. Local government leaders, educators, hospital and health care personnel, gerontologists, youth counselors, law enforcement officials, juvenile justice professionals, as well as the people they serve—students, parents, people with disabilities, youth at risk—are among the most eloquent arts advocates. Their testimony at hearings and in meetings exposes the false premise that investing in the arts competes with other public benefits when, in fact, it contributes to them.
- **Cutting the arts will not help balance a state's budget.** The arts represent a fraction of state general fund expenditure—about 0.04%, or less than 1/20 of 1%. Yet state arts agencies support about 18,000 organizations, schools and artists, making the economic, educational, civic and cultural benefits of the arts available to 5,100 communities in U.S. Legislators will be interested in the organizations and jobs this tiny portion of the state budget supports in their own communities.

Question: How can we be sure to get our message across?

Response: The setting may be unfamiliar, but you are planning a purposeful conversation during which you will ask perfectly reasonable questions, so **rehearse your pitch** until its sequence feels natural and the words feel comfortable.

Also **consider bringing a team.** One effective way is a three-person approach:

- The first person should be someone with a relationship with the official, such as a current or prospective donor, volunteer or constituent. At the meeting, this person refers to the relationship, explains that the small group is here because they feel support for the state arts agency is important, and mentions that they each would like briefly to share their perspectives.
- The second person presents fact-based evidence pertaining to public benefits and the return on the investment.



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- The third person provides a personal story that illustrates how the transforming experience of the arts benefitted someone they know and care about.

This provides a powerful context in which to request support. If the official has been supportive, this is a good time to say thank you and communicate that the support has been noticed. If the official has not yet been supportive, it is constructive to communicate that this has been noticed, but that you are hopeful that what you have to say, any questions you can answer and any information you can provide will lead to a favorable response. This experience gives an official a good opportunity to understand why constituents are making this specific request, what public benefits are involved, that an active and organized constituency for this request exists, and that there is an occasion at hand to gain support from that constituency. © Jonathan Katz

MAKE THE MOST OF THESE IDEAS

The most effective case for the arts is built around a careful selection of arguments and evidence. Here are some suggestions for fine-tuning and adapting this document for use in your own state:

- **Excerpt at will.** This document is designed to be a menu of material that you can excerpt, mix and match as needed. Keep it close at hand when you are preparing testimony, crafting presentations, developing advocacy talking points or working with the media. A low-format Microsoft Word version is available to make it easy to borrow from the text.
- **Integrate this information into your communications.** Publish short excerpts in your newsletter or include links on your Web site.
- **Adapt these arguments to your target audience.** Tailor your case to the interests and motivations of individual policymakers. Some will respond best to economic arguments, others will be more alive to educational or civic themes. Adapt the messages as needed to match the political values and policy priorities in your state.
- **Augment these arguments with local data and stories.** Although national information can be a useful point of departure, policymakers will need local examples and data to understand the relevance of your case to themselves and to voters. Be sure to highlight examples from your own state that showcase the power of the arts and that demonstrate how communities benefit from the work of your state arts agency.
- **Incorporate this information into orientation materials and training events.** This document can help new council members, new agency staff members or beginning advocates to answer questions about the value of government funding.



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- **Familiarize your key spokespeople with these concepts.** Your leadership, staff, constituents and advocates all should be able to speak in harmony about the value of the arts and why support for the state arts agency is essential.
- **Add your own “elevator speeches.”** Pick one or two themes from this document that resonate in your state, then distill that argument into a short statement that can be used as a conversation starter with potential supporters.
- **Review these materials as a team.** This document can serve as an occasion to gather your agency staff, council and members of your advocacy community to discuss what messaging strategies will be most effective in your state.