Engaging Members of Congress

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WESTAF
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Engaging Members of Congress

“As you build your strategies on engaging members of Congress, you’ll want to develop dual relationships with DC staff and district staff.” - Karmen Rossi

Panelists

Ashanti McGee, District Representative, U.S. Representative Susie Lee (Nevada)

Karmen Rossi, Deputy State Director, Military and Veterans Affairs for Congresswoman Liz Cheney (Wyoming)

Laurel Sayer, Chief Executive Officer, Perpetua Resources (Idaho)

Call to action

- In this pandemic, consider it an obligation to tell the story of the arts and say thank you to members of Congress for their support. Your two key messages are: (i) the arts provide viable economic value in the state and need support and (ii) your gratitude for COVID funding.
- Send open invitations to members to your events (including virtual).
- Make a particular point to learn about the committees your member(s) serves on and focus on members who serve on key appropriations committees.

Recognizing the importance of developing working relationships with staff

- Staff are key to effectively engaging a member of Congress.
- Staff do the scheduling and a meeting with a staff member can be invaluable to you.
- Don’t assume that staff have the same view(s) as the member.
- Staff have policy portfolios. Whoever is responsible for the arts can be particularly helpful and so can those with other portfolios.
- District staff can be instrumental in converting your issues/concerns into legislative action.
- District staff can also engage their colleagues in Washington on your behalf.

Understanding the ways that a Congressional office can support you

Beyond discussing issues with you and the member’s position, a Congressional office can support you through any of the following services:

- Producing certificates and commendations
- Writing letters of support for your organization, project, or work - some call these “gold bonds”
- Attending and organizing award ceremonies
- Organizing roundtables
- Publicizing recognition of national months and local observances
Amplifying your message on social media
Having a member or staff attend community meetings
Producing issue research
Coordinating bill sponsorship and development of legislation.

Dealing with objections to public funding of the arts
- Provide members that may not be supportive of fiscal measures ways to support the arts other than supporting increased appropriations.
- Understand that there are some people that we are never going to win over.
- Focus your messaging on the arts/creative economy as economic drivers, the importance of the arts to children and young people, and the importance of arts and culture in rural communities.
- Learn more about the member and their connection to the arts (for example, their connection as a supporter of a local choir or their spouse being an active arts supporter and volunteer).
- Consider having young people write in to share the value of their experiences with the arts.

Building relationships with Congressional offices - be strategic and don’t give up!
- Consider meeting with the member as a coalition. Your coalition, for example, could consist of any of the following - an arts advocacy organization, a local arts council, several arts organizations in their district, and a representative from the private sector/business community who is an advocate for the arts.
- Be prepared to speak to “arts &”, that being, arts and the economy (creative economy), arts and veterans, arts and healthcare.
- In this environment, setting up a Zoom call or an in-person meeting is possible depending on the circumstances of the office. Remember, these calls or meetings are generally about 20 minutes.
- Don’t worry about being annoying, rather be willing to throw anything you think is important at staff with whom you are developing a relationship. Remember, staff are responsible for staying abreast of issues in the district and nationally.

Engaging members to show public support of the arts
- Members and even their spouses can be called upon to open arts events and support arts causes.
- Consider leveraging art and other competitions as a means of drawing attention to the arts and building connection with members of Congress. Examples include the Congressional Art Competition, a high school art competition, and Poetry Out Loud.