

Most opera organizations believe they cannot prioritize the creation of a government affairs staff position. Generally, the CEO does the government affairs work, in addition to their already busy jobs. A more sustainable approach to government affairs needs to be implemented for advocacy to be treated as the core business function it is.

- **Join and participate in existing advocacy coalitions.** Every state and many cities and/or counties have an arts advocacy coalition. These groups already have access to timely advocacy information and connections to elected officials. Start to build your advocacy capacity by joining the groups that are already doing the work.

At the national level, OPERA America maintains a government affairs department that represents the field before the White House, Congress, and federal government agencies. OPERA America tracks federal legislation; participates in national policy coalitions; and conducts meetings on behalf of its members at federal agencies, Capitol Hill, and the White House. OPERA America also provides advocacy updates to the field through emails, social media, and presentations to keep the membership informed.

OPERA America needs its members to participate in the federal advocacy process by responding to Action Alerts, making calls to members of Congress, and stepping up when OPERA America asks for member participation. Make sure you receive OPERA America's advocacy Action Alerts — read them, take action, and share them!

- **Include advocacy in the criteria when recruiting new board members.** Board members have the potential to be powerful advocates. They are volunteer community leaders who deeply believe in the organization's mission. Board members bring a wealth of connections to their board service, and they can be powerful relationship-builders for the organizations. Seeking new board members with established relationships with public administrators and officials will greatly benefit an organization. Board members who join an organization's leadership in meetings with elected officials will leave a lasting impact and make a difference.
- **Invite elected officials to serve on your board.** Elected public officials are allowed to serve on nonprofit boards. The officials can bring a wealth of knowledge and connections. Just be mindful of federal and state conflict of interest laws for government employees.
- **Establish a board advocacy committee.** At the most basic level, a board advocacy committee can help send letters to officials and forward Action Alerts. At a higher, more effective level, an advocacy committee can identify year-round advocacy goals that will ensure an organization remains primed and ready to respond to the ongoing shifts in government policies and regulations. See OPERA America's Advocacy Guide on Nonprofit Boards and Advocacy for more information.

REIMAGINE THE TRADITIONAL GOVERNMENT AFFAIRS STAFF POSITION.

IDEA #1: Establish an advocacy staff cohort. Rather than creating a full-time position fulfilled by a single person, consider who in the organization is already building relationships as part of their work and bring them together in a cohort. Staff positions in development, education, community engagement, and special events are actively engaging with individuals in philanthropy, government, and education, among other sectors. These staff members may not think of their work through the lens of advocacy, but that is exactly what they are doing. They are helping to build authentic relationships and deepen understanding of the organization and its impact. By spreading the government relations activities, no one staff person carries all the vital relationships for an organization. The staff advocacy cohort can divide up the government affairs responsibilities, which may include:

- Inviting elected officials to all events (development);
- Participating in local, state, and federal arts advocacy coalitions on behalf of the organization (various cohort members depending on who is available);
- Forwarding Action Alerts and advocacy updates throughout their organization (community engagement and education);
- Keeping track of legislators and their key staff to expedite the sending of invitations and meeting requests (development);
- Participating in the board advocacy committee (various cohort members depending on who is available);
- Attending in-person meetings with elected officials (CEO and/or member of advocacy cohort).

IDEA #2: Share a government affairs position with another organization. Every performing arts organization in a city does not need its own government affairs staff person. Instead, consider hiring for one position that works for two organizations. The staff member would be on one organization's payroll, and the other organizations would be billed for part of the staff person's salary and overhead. The shared government affairs position would:

- Track legislation at the local, state, and federal levels;
- Maintain relationships with policymakers and their staffs;
- Participate in local, state, and federal arts advocacy coalitions;
- Disseminate Action Alerts and send advocacy updates to the organizations; and
- Participate and support the board's advocacy committee.

OPERA America's advocacy guides were developed in 2024 by Amy Fitterer, consultant, with support from The Music Man Foundation.