



Effective Practices for Sustaining Programs to Advance Careers in the Arts for People with Disabilities

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BACKGROUND

The Statewide Forums on Careers in the Arts for People with Disabilities program had its genesis in 1998 when the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) in partnership with three federal agencies: the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, U.S. Department of Education, and the Social Security Administration convened the National Forum on Careers in the Arts for People with Disabilities at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington DC. Its purpose was to assess the state of education and career opportunities for individuals with disabilities, and to identify strategies for overcoming obstacles. Significant obstacles exist for individuals with disabilities who want to pursue careers in the arts such as:

- Lack of access to appropriate training and education in the arts;
- Limited exposure to information and resources pertaining to the range of career opportunities as artists, arts technicians or arts administrators;
- The arts not being perceived by rehabilitation professionals as a valid career path;
- Stereotyped rejection of disability content in the arts as innately sentimental or therapeutic and
- Fear of loss of social security income and health benefits with movement into employment.

Subsequent to the Forum, three summits on arts education, arts administration and vocational rehabilitation were assembled to determine specific projects to advance education and career opportunities in the arts. A final summit meeting on November 30, 2000 held at the Kennedy Center prioritized the recommendations and strategies for implementing them. A key recommendation was for individual states to convene Statewide Forums on Careers in the Arts for People with Disabilities.

In 2002, the pilot year for the program, the forums specifically addressed the needs of the individual artist. These first Forums focused on providing workshops to

advance career opportunities for individual artists with disabilities and cultural arts access. Building on the lessons learned in this early work, the focus of the 2003 Forums was modified to emphasize systems change and the development of comprehensive strategies to remove barriers and establish strategic partnerships to advance careers in the arts for people with disabilities. With this “big picture” perspective, subsequent Forums served as catalysts to establish and foster networks and partnerships that would set priorities for activities that would be carried out on a long-term basis. The *VSA arts* affiliates, arts agencies and their partners continue to carry out efforts such as advancing policy and legislative change, establishing arts and disability networks, and conducting ongoing workshops, programs and services.

Planning committees were key building blocks to establishing the focus of the Forums and to the formation of partnerships. Beginning in 2003 the state arts agencies and *VSA* affiliates were required to engage a broad range of representatives from the arts, disability service, public benefits and employment sectors in the planning and implementation of their forums. All planning committees included artists with disabilities. Artists with disabilities were expected to play a central role in the planning and implementation of the forums, although the involvement of artists with disabilities on the content of the forums varied by state.

Under the direction and guidance of the planning committee, either a 1 to 2 day forum or a series of regional meetings were carried out. The forums addressed barriers for artists with disabilities and provided resources on training and employment through panel presentations, educational sessions, discussion groups, resource rooms and other methods. Each state was also required to have participants complete an evaluation of forum activities and to engage in a process to generate long-term needs and strategies.

STATEWIDE FORUMS

The Statewide Forum on Careers in the Arts for People with Disabilities program was launched in 2002 to address the specific needs of artists with disabilities and improve employment opportunities. Between 2002 and 2006, twenty state arts agencies and *VSA arts* affiliates from the United States and Puerto Rico collaborated to conduct forums that involved over two thousand artists with disabilities, arts employers, educators, and service agency representatives.

Each state was expected to plan and carry out their forum under the direction of a planning committee that could address local needs. As this program only provided one-year funding, we had a specific interest in the career related activities that the state arts agencies and *VSA arts* affiliates were able to sustain post the original 10 -12 month funding period. The types of activities conducted post the forums were dissemination of information, arts events/ exhibits, formation of new partnerships

and collaborations, training of artists, Web sites, educating policy makers and legislators.

VSA *arts* affiliates and state arts agencies continued their collaboration as well as formed new partnerships with organizations serving individuals with disabilities and arts organizations/arts employers.

Many of the VSA *arts* affiliates and state arts councils modified or enhanced their own organization or agency's capacity to be more accessible and inclusive by adding artists with disabilities to their advisory or planning committees, employing a person with a disability, changing applications and calls for art, revising policies and procedures to be more accessible to artists with disabilities and other activities.

PARTICIPANTS

To date, 20 state arts agencies and VSA *arts* affiliates have conducted statewide forums, listed here by year:

2002: Maryland, Minnesota, New Mexico;
2003: California, Hawaii, Mississippi, Puerto Rico, Washington;
2004: Arkansas, Indiana, Massachusetts, Missouri, Texas;
2005: Arizona, Florida, Nebraska, New Hampshire, and Ohio.
2006: Tennessee, Maine

EFFECTIVE PRACTICES

Several practices were identified by states who had successfully sustained programs to advance career opportunities for people with disabilities. Key was the establishment of a core working group and strong community partnerships.

Establishing a Core Working Group

- In every interview, each state referred to the importance of a “good core of people that were really interested in moving forward.” This core group was comprised of artists with disabilities as well as individuals from partnering organizations.

Developing a Structure for the Core Working Group

- This included developing a mission statement, goals, a strategic plan, and often financial support.

“Work Smarter” The Importance of Partnerships

- Partnerships were instrumental to the continuation of activities building on the work of the forums. They allowed organizations to use their resources in a more efficient way.

CHALLENGES

Some of the greatest challenges for the state arts agencies and *VSA arts* affiliates were to create and sustain an organizational structure and working partnerships to support the career advancement of artists with disabilities.

Other challenges included:

- Integrating artists with disabilities into the larger arts community;
- Restrictions on funding;
- Transportation and accommodation needs;
- Benefits planning.

For artists with disabilities, the top three areas identified as priorities to advance their careers were:

- Professional development,
- Funding and
- Strategies on how to work and keep benefits.

FINDINGS

Since 2002, over two thousand artists with disabilities, arts employers, educators, and service agency representatives participated in forums in twenty states across the country. Artists attending the forums had a range of disabilities including physical, emotional/mental, learning, developmental, deaf/hearing disability, blind/visual disability. The primary artistic discipline of the artists was visual arts. In addition, there were participating artists from theater, literary, dance, music, and the film/digital arts field. The majority of states were successful in attracting artists with disabilities to their Forums, but there were continual struggles in attracting arts employers. While artists with disabilities were a primary group of interest, many states felt they would have benefited from more arts employers in attendance.

A little over half (56%) of the states held a single, one-day forum while other states held forums in multiple sites, throughout the state. The format of each forum was similar and included a keynote speaker, planning sessions, moderated panels, breakout sessions, exhibits and/or performances. Whereas the structure of the forums was relatively consistent; variation was found in the topics addressed. The topics rated highly by artists with disabilities included: testimonials by successful artists with disabilities, professional development, benefits counseling, grant and funding opportunities, and creating action plans for career development. Similarly, representatives from various organizations felt the most important aspects of the forum were hearing the needs of artists with disabilities and personal stories about how they successfully pursued their career.

POST FORUM ACTIVITIES TO ADVANCE CAREERS OF ARTISTS WITH DISABILITIES

Multiple changes that took place as a result of the Forums at both an individual and organizational level. Following are case examples that exemplify the work of states that have been particularly successful in developing long-term plans to continue and sustain the work originating from the Forums. Then the strategies that enabled states to sustain their activities are discussed in detail under Effective Practices.

An overwhelming majority (89.0%) of the states engaged in one or more post-forum activities. Noted here are some of the practices carried out by the states:

Artists' Networks

Across the forums, participants prioritized the need to communicate and network with other artists with disabilities. A majority of the states responded to this need by establishing some type of network of artists with disabilities. Several States hosted a web site for artists with disabilities and/or hosted a list serve for artists with disabilities

Training

Additional training for artists with disabilities as well as those in the arts and disability fields was another activity proposed by forum participants. Many of the states conducted trainings for various groups: artists with disabilities, arts organizations/arts employers, and Vocational Rehabilitation.

Partnerships

As part of the forum process, selected states were encouraged to build community partners in the arts and disability fields. Many of the states continued to enhance their partnerships and collaborations with organizations serving people with disabilities and arts organizations/arts employers.

Resource Materials and Sponsored Events

Many of the states supported artists with disabilities by providing specific resources or opportunities to show their art. Several states disseminated resource materials for artists with disabilities and/or conducted/sponsored arts events that included artists with disabilities. A few states created a publication focusing on artists with disabilities.

Educating Policy Makers

Six states educated and informed policy makers about the needs of artists with disabilities. One state, Hawaii has enacted legislation based on the findings of their forum. Through the efforts of *VSA arts of Hawaii*, in 2004, Senate Concurrent Resolution 199 was passed calling for the convening of a task force to create a strategic plan for advancing a formal arts career pathway for individuals with disabilities. *VSA arts of Hawaii* and the University of Hawaii have been working with the Department of Labor Workforce Developmental Council members, the state

Department of Education and the Hawaii State Foundation on Culture and the Arts to develop a strategic plan formalizing the career and technical pathways in creative and cultural industries for people with disabilities.