

NASAA 2025 Executive Forum Deputy Director Input Summary by AI & NASAA's Eric Giles

The Deputy Director discussion on July 16, 2025 revealed a leadership landscape marked by uncertainty, constrained resources, and a desire for grounded collaboration. Despite the challenges, the group demonstrates creativity, resilience, and strong peer connectivity. Below are the primary themes present throughout the materials collected during the session- Mentimeter results, small group breakouts, chat, and transcripts

1. Navigating Uncertainty, Complexity & Change

- Deputy Directors are operating in a climate shaped by exponential change, policy flux, and compounded urgency.
- There is growing concern over ambiguity from NEA restructuring, legislative shifts, and the rise of technologies like AI.
- Deputy Directors are actively balancing day-to-day survival with the need for longer-term adaptive planning.
- Deputy Directors described a shared experience of stress, ambiguity, and the emotional toll of constant change.

2. Staffing, Capacity & Organizational Health

- Burnout, survivor guilt, and emotional fatigue were common sentiments across agencies.
- Many are dealing with frozen positions, reduced teams, and the challenge of doing more with fewer people.
- Flat or marginally increased funding is seen as a quiet success, but still insufficient to address sector-wide losses.
- Respondents emphasized the need for realistic timelines, workload sharing, and mental health awareness.

3. Equity, Compliance & Policy Navigation

- State legislation (e.g., Washington's I-200) and federal constraints are creating complex conditions for equity-centered work.
- A need for better understanding of AI-related laws, Section 504/508 updates, and federal expectations was expressed.
- Deputy Directors are often navigating compliance pressure while seeking ways to sustain DEI-focused programming.
- Legal mandates are reshaping access efforts, often requiring cross-departmental interpretation and implementation.

4. Collaboration, Revenue Innovation & Public Partnerships

- States are exploring revenue mechanisms beyond general funds, such as arts license plates or corporate support.
- Some are collaborating with urban redevelopment efforts to use vacated federal/commercial space for arts initiatives.
- Creative placemaking and multi-sector partnerships are seen as critical tools for sustainability.
- Community voice and authentic inclusion remain a priority even as agencies explore new resource strategies.

5. Peer Connection, Learning & NASAA's Role

- Deputy Directors repeatedly affirmed the value of peer group spaces, describing them as emotionally grounding and strategically useful.
- There is a desire for more regular, tiered conversations (e.g., DD-specific, ED-DD combined, breakout support).
- Sessions like 'bitch sessions' provided informal but meaningful space to surface systemic frustrations that could evolve into solutions.
- NASAA is widely appreciated as a consistent, stabilizing presence—described as a 'port in the storm'.

6. Resilience, Pride & the Human Side of Leadership

- Despite immense strain, leaders expressed pride in what they've held together—programs, teams, community connection.
- There's growing recognition that emotional leadership is part of strategic leadership.
- Deputy Directors noted the importance of creating space for laughter, celebration, and creativity even in hard times.

Forum Ideas & Ongoing Needs

- Specific Executive Forum ideas included integrated creative exercises, real-time input tools (e.g., Mentimeter), and cross-state showcases.
- Forum suggestions included wellness elements and arts-based experiences as a counterbalance to policy-heavy content.
- There is continued interest in learning about other states' innovations, especially low-cost and sustainable ideas.
- Topics like artificial intelligence, cultural policy, and adaptive leadership were flagged for deeper exploration.
- Deputy Directors want a space that blends strategic visioning with honest conversation and emotional renewal.