



**Virginia Commission for the Arts  
Commission Board Meeting  
Lynchburg | The Virginian Hotel  
September 25, 2025**

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## **Board Meeting Minutes**

### **I. Attendees**

- Commissioners: Barbara Parker, Frazier Millner Armstrong, Lou Flowers, Hayley Allison, Raven Custalow, Debbie Garrett, Alex Grabiec, Vanessa Thaxton-Ward, Tim Zhao
- Staff: Colleen Dugan Messick, Casey Polczynski, Shauna Friend, Cathy Welborn, Lo Bruner, Dawn LeHuray, Jack Siegel (Virginia Management Fellow)
- Attorney General's Office: Abigail Gump, Attorney

### **II. Call to Order**

Chair Parker called the meeting to order at 10:30 a.m. and welcomed new Commissioners Custalow and Allison to the Board. She shared Commissioner Garrett's reappointment and introduced Jack Siegel, the VCA's third Virginia Management Fellow.

Chair Parker conducted a Roll Call of Commissioners:

Parker, here  
Armstrong, here  
Flowers, here  
Allison, here  
Custalow, here  
Garrett, here  
Grabiec, here  
Thaxton-Ward, here  
Zhao, here

### **III. Approval of Minutes – June 2025 Commission Board Meeting**

Chair Parker called for a motion to approve the June 2025 Board meeting minutes:

Motion: Commissioner Flowers  
Seconded: Commissioner Armstrong  
All approved; motion passed.

Abstained: Commissioners Thaxton-Ward, Custalow, and Allison

### **IV. Chair Update**

Chair Parker provided a Chair update.

- COV Commissioner Emails | Commissioner emails have been established through the Virginia Information Technology Agency (VITA) due to increased hacking and security risks. VITA charges \$58 per account per month, and the VCA has requested additional funding to cover these costs beginning in FY27 and beyond.
- NEA | The VCA has been awarded its Partnership Agreement with level funding. This award includes an additional \$25,000 to support America 250 programming for new and

innovative visual and performing art projects commemorating the 250th Anniversary of the American Revolution. While no match was required, the VCA is leveraging \$15,000 in unused FY25 VA250 Impact Grant funds and \$10,000 in carryforward funds, resulting in a total investment of \$50,000 for this program. FY26 VA250 Impact Grant applications will be open October 1 through October 31 for Virginia nonprofit arts organizations. This one-time, non-matching grant offers up to \$5,000 for activities occurring December 1, 2025, through July 4, 2026. Additionally, the VCA submitted its FY26 NEA application earlier this week.

- **Community Stakeholder Roundtables** | Roundtables have been postponed to summer 2026, with surveys to be distributed at that time to gather feedback. The public, Advisory Panelists, Commissioners, Roster Artists, and arts organizations will be invited to convene and provide input on how the VCA can continue to evolve its grant programs and reduce barriers to access. The results of these Roundtables will inform the FY28 Guidelines for Funding.
- **Virginians for the Arts (VFTA)** | Colleen, Cathy, and Jack presented an overview of the agency's grant programs at the recent VFTA Board meeting. The VCA awarded a \$5,000 special recognition grant to support an upgrade of the VFTA website, enhancing its design for mobile friendliness and improved accessibility.
- **VCA Move** | Following the November election, the VCA will relocate to Reids Row (formerly Morson's Row), as COV tenants from the soon-to-be-demolished Monroe Building transition into the VCA's current space. As a result, VCA's rent will increase by \$25,000, and the agency will be working with the Secretary of Education to secure additional appropriations to cover increased costs.

## **V. Budget & Policy Committee Update**

Commissioner Armstrong, Chair of the Budget & Policy Committee, provided an overview of a recent letter of appeal from Firehouse Theatre regarding the priority level of its FY26 General Operating Support (GOS) award. The letter was received in August and did not meet the established appeal criteria, as it highlighted plans for future growth rather than current operations outlined at the time their original application was submitted. While the Committee recommends maintaining the original priority 2 level, it deeply values Firehouse Theatre's ongoing commitment to future programming and looks forward to supporting this vital organization in the future.

The Budget and Policy Committee asked for a motion to retain the GOS priority 2 rating for Firehouse Theatre.

Motion: Commissioner Parker  
Seconded: Commissioner Flowers  
All approved, motion passed

Commissioner Flowers expressed her appreciation for Commissioner Armstrong's leadership in stepping in to lead this process, as she was unable to chair the Committee at the time the appeal letter was submitted.

## **VI. Diversity and Accessibility Committee Update**

Commissioner Grabiec, Chair of the Diversity and Accessibility Committee, shared an overview of latest Diversity and Accessibility Committee updates.

- **Website** | The VCA collaborated with VITA to implement and roll out a new Smartling language translation application. This feature allows users to access the VCA's website in 11 different languages. As part of a greater state initiative, this was implemented at no cost to the agency.
- **Accessibility Statement** | The VCA has developed a new accessibility statement which lives

on the VCA's Accessibility Resource Page. During development, the VCA reviewed accessibility statements from other institutions and intentionally kept its own statement broad to reflect the diversity of organizations it serves. This open-ended approach positions the VCA as a resource and encourages grantees to adopt inclusive practices that serve the broader community.

- **Accessibility Resources Page |** The VCA Accessibility Resources have been recategorized to better serve various VCA constituents, including arts attendees, artists, and arts organizations. Each section now features curated resources tailored specifically to the unique needs of these groups.

Commissioner Grabiec turned the floor over to Deputy Polczynski, who provided additional updates.

- **Passport Program |** The Passport Program currently includes 45 participating organizations, collectively serving 630 WIC cardholders and providing 109,905 free tickets and experiences. Key findings show that the most successful partners prominently featured the program on their websites. As part of a new toolkit, staff developed customizable social media templates and flyers for participants to use in their communications. A recent webinar highlighting these updates and resources received positive feedback from attendees.
- **Virginia Voice |** To expand the Passport Program, VCA is exploring a partnership with Virginia Voice to increase access for visually impaired audiences through funding tickets, transportation, and companion services. An initial \$10K FY26 Special Recognition grant is proposed to launch this pilot initiative.
- **NEA Accessibility Requirements |** The NEA now requires VCA grantees to designate a staff member to serve as a Section 504 Coordinator. Additionally, a *Section 504 Self-Evaluation Workbook* or similar compliance documentation must be completed and kept on file. The VCA is offering two forms of support to help grantees meet this requirement. First, the VCA will partner with NEA accessibility staff to offer a webinar on how to complete the 504 Self-Evaluation Workbook. Second, grantees may join a cohort to complete an *Arts and Culture Accessibility Self-Assessment* developed by Open Door Arts.
- **Accessibility Microgrants |** The VCA plans to launch an accessibility grant in FY27, inspired by similar programs from South Arts, Tennessee, and South Carolina Arts Commissions. These grants would support facility, equipment, and programmatic accessibility enhancements. Awards would be up to \$2,000 with a 10% cash match requirement. The program will launch in FY27, with an initial \$50,000.

## VII. Executive Director Update

Executive Director Messick provided an overview of agency updates.

- **Mission Moment |** Thank you notes from VCA grantees were distributed to Commissioners to read at their leisure.
- **Staff Updates |** In July, the VCA celebrated Cathy Welborn's 19 years of service, with Colleen expressing gratitude for Cathy's expertise and unwavering dedication to the arts. That same month, staff gathered for a retreat at Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden. During the retreat, Casey Polczynski and Jack Siegel led an activity to modernize the VCA Code, which had not been updated in several years and was previously flagged in APA audit findings. Chair Parker and Vice Chair Armstrong provided input on this new draft, and redlined copies have been distributed to Commissioners. The updated Code is now under review by Secretary Guidera and the Governor's policy team. If approved, it will advance to the General Assembly. Also, during the retreat, Dawn LeHuray and Lo Bruner presented findings from the May Constituent Feedback Survey. This presentation helped to guide discussion on how the VCA could invest the additional \$2 million appropriation to address

identified needs beyond general operating support. Staff then developed a preliminary funding framework that served as the foundation for the Special Fund Task Force meetings held in August. To infuse creativity into the day, VCA Teaching Artist Theodora Miller led staff through an art activity inspired by her Greek heritage, blending Greek letterforms with intuitive painting.

- **FY26 Grant Awards Press Release** | Dawn LeHuray shared that the announcement was distributed through a newly developed press list, with a number of outlets following up for additional details. The release achieved broad reach on social media, generating the highest engagement metrics across all platforms to date and received positive feedback from the arts community.
- **Gratitude Video Project** | Dawn LeHuray shared that the VCA has invited several grantees and Roster Artists across all eight regions to contribute to a compilation video. Each participant will submit a 30-second clip expressing gratitude to the VCA, NEA, and General Assembly, while highlighting the importance of the arts in their region. A videographer will compile the submissions into a three-minute video, which will be shared with the General Assembly, NEA, and other key stakeholders who support and invest in the VCA's mission.

Commissioner Armstrong recommended implementing a system to monitor media coverage and explore partnerships with media outlets, noting that shared stories could also advance the missions of those organizations.

## **VIII. Commission Votes**

Chair Parker provided an overview of FY27 Artist Rosters, noting that three Screening Sessions were held. As a token of appreciation for the Advisory Panelists' time and contributions, she shared that thank-you cards featuring the original *On the Square* design (an arts event hosted by VCA and DGS for COV employees) would be mailed to each Advisory Panelist. Chair Parker then invited Commissioners who were assigned to these Screening Sessions to share their overviews.

### **FY27 Teaching Artist Roster**

Commissioner Grabiec noted that the session was conducted efficiently and highlighted the diverse professional backgrounds represented by the Advisory Panelists. Key discussion points included whether applicants should highlight teacher versus student artwork, video documentation, and the value of lesson plans aligning with VA SOLs. As applicants Art for the Journey (AFTJ) and Amelia Rafle received extended discussion during voting, Commissioner Grabiec asked for further clarification on AFTJ's inclusion recommendation.

Lo Bruner noted that while VCA staff have a broader understanding of AFTJ as a GOS applicant, they upheld the Advisory Panel's recommendation, based on comments provided during the review process and a final vote that opposed inclusion. She added that the Advisory Panel summary shared with AFTJ will include constructive feedback to support application improvements should they choose to reapply in the future.

### **FY27 Touring Artist Roster Panel #1 | Music**

Chair Parker described the Advisory Panel as efficient and well-versed, emphasizing their valued ability to identify nuances in the applications that might not be immediately apparent. She noted that the prior use of allocations by current Touring Artists demonstrated how effectively they utilized state funding, which was a significant consideration during the review process.

### **FY26 Touring Artist Roster Panel #2 | Multidisciplinary**

Commissioner Thaxton-Ward noted that lead readers were well-prepared and knowledgeable

in their respective disciplines. She also shared that the Advisory Panel reflected adequate diversity and representation and that the Session was conducted efficiently through both discussion and voting.

Chair Parker opened the floor for discussion.

Lo Bruner welcomed any discussion on AFTJ in the case fellow staff or VCA Commissioners had additional insights to share. Commissioner Grabiec noted that AFTJ appeared to be a borderline case, possibly facing difficulties in documenting their impact and reach due to the nature of the communities they serve. Commissioner Armstrong agreed and emphasized the Commission's responsibility to assess applicants consistently through the formal application process, noting that while prior knowledge can provide helpful context, recommendations should ultimately be grounded in the materials submitted.

Chair Parker made a motion to approve the FY27 Teaching Artist and Touring Artist Rosters, as well as the proposed FY27 budgets for the Arts in Practice and Virginia Touring Grants, as recommended by the Advisory Panels and VCA staff.

Motion: Commissioner Armstrong  
Seconded: Commissioner Thaxton-Ward  
All approved, motion passed

### **FY26 Arts in Practice Guidelines Update**

Chair Parker explained the rationale to for reinstating the Arts in Practice 15% cash match requirement, highlighting a significant drop in applications since the introduction of the 1:1 cash match at the start of the grant cycle. Lo Bruner noted that although the 1:1 match was drafted a year in advance, staff recognize the financial challenges AIP applicants have faced at the federal level since early 2026, such as schools, libraries, or other educational organizations. She shared that feedback from the 2025 Constituent Survey and VCA Teaching Artists confirmed the 1:1 match as a barrier to participation. The revision supports the program's commitment to accessibility, and as this vote occurs in the first quarter of the fiscal year, applicants will have ample opportunity to re-engage for the remainder of the FY26 grant cycle.

Chair Parker called for a motion to approve revising the Arts in Practice cash match requirement to 15%, effective October 1.

Motion: Commissioner Grabiec  
Seconded: Commissioner Garrett  
All approved, motion passed

## **IX. Constituent Feedback Survey Summary**

Dawn LeHuray and Lo Bruner provided an overview of the 2025 Constituent Feedback Survey results.

- Survey rollout and respondents | The survey was shared widely across VCA's communication channels and further distributed by grantees and Local Arts Agencies (LAAs). Respondents represented a wide variety of artistic disciplines, with the top participant types being performing groups, arts centers/schools of the arts, and individual artists. While 71.5% had received a grant from the VCA, responses from regions 3, 7, and 8 were limited.
- Average annual budget size | There was representation across a full spectrum of budget sizes, ranging from under \$50,000 to over \$1 million, with the largest concentration being

organizations with budgets under \$50,000.

- Top challenges | Both artists and arts organizations identified the same top three challenges: financial barriers, marketing and visibility, and lack of facility spaces.
- Top barriers to applying for VCA support | Barriers varied across organizations, with most respondents selecting multiple challenges, making it difficult to identify specific barriers tied to budget size. Generally, organizations with larger budgets reported fewer barriers overall.
- Additional types of support | Various forms of support beyond general operating support were viewed favorably. These included professional development training and webinars, capacity-building resources, networking and peer support opportunities, and educational programming. At the staff retreat, it was determined that the two remaining types of support, advocacy and policy, and marketing and promotional support, fell outside of VCA's scope as a grant-making agency.
- Preferred PD format | Virtual sessions were the top preferred format, selected by 50% of respondents. This was followed by equal preference for in-person regional support sessions and a statewide arts conference.
- Dates for statewide arts conference | No single month stood out as preferred, with October, February, and March 2026 all receiving similar support. Additionally, 20% of respondents indicated they were unlikely to attend.
- Additional Feedback | A wide range of feedback was provided which included improvements to VCA grants, support for individual artists including teaching and performing artists, accessibility needs, rural communities, and suggestions for VCA to serve actively as a connector and resource for Virginia's arts community. The top feedback highlighted gratitude for VCA's ongoing, reliable support year after year.

## X. Special Fund Task Force Report

Commissioner Garrett, Chair of the Special Fund Task Force Committee, provided an overview and expressed gratitude to staff for their efforts. She shared a timeline of the Task Force, sharing that it was established in March, the VCA received notice of its Partnership agreement in June, and in August, staff presented the proposed budget over two committee meetings. She emphasized that since these recommendations are supported by special funding, it will be essential to capture metrics that demonstrate the funding's impact and report on outcomes afterward.

### **FY26 – Proposed total investment: \$120,000**

- \$ 20,000 – VCA Professional Development webinars
- \$ 15,000 – Accessibility
  - Open Webinars (\$3,000)
  - Permanent Resources (\$2,000)
  - Self-Assessment Study Group (\$5,000)
  - Passport Program Refinement (\$5,000), working with VDH
- \$ 50,000 – Capacity Building Grants (for organizations with budgets \$750,000 and below)
- \$ 35,000 – Small and Rural Arts Communities Network (potential collaboration with Geoff Kershner, Small Town Big Arts, special attention to regions 3, 7, 8)
- \$ 0 – Local Art Agency Networking touchpoints

### **FY27– Proposed total investment: \$918,000**

- \$500,000 – FY27 GOS Grants (start at \$5,000)
- \$ 75,000 – FY27 OSS Grants
  - start at \$3,000 for \$20K-\$74K operating budgets and \$4K for \$75K-\$150K operating budgets)
- \$ 75,000 – Capacity Building Grants (for organizations with budgets \$750,000 and below)
- \$ 63,000 – Accessibility

- Accessibility Microgrants Program (\$50,000)
- Open Webinars (\$3,000)
- Self-Assessment Study Group (\$5,000+)
- Passport Program Expansion (\$5,000+)
- \$ 50,000 – Artist Catalyst Grants (\$500 each)
- \$ 20,000 – VCA Professional Development Webinars
- \$ 35,000 – Small and Rural Arts Communities Network
- \$100,000 – Education Impact Grant
- \$ 0 - Local Art Agency Networking touchpoints

### **Arts Fund**

- \$150,000 – Reinstate ArtWorks, VCA’s statewide arts conference
  - Planned for late October or early November 2027
  - To be held biennially (every other year)

Chair Parker asked for a motion to approve the Special Fund Task Force recommendations.

Motion: Commissioner Garrett  
 Seconded: No second required  
 All approved, motion passed

### **XI. FY26 Capacity Building Grant Guidelines**

Chair Parker asked for a motion to approve the FY26 Capacity Building Grant Guidelines, which would be implemented on November 1 as part of approved SFTF recommendations.

Motion: Commissioner Armstrong  
 Seconded: Commissioner Garrett  
 All approved, motion passed

### **XII. Public Comment and Next Board Meetings**

Chair Parker thanked the Commissioners for their time and efforts. She invited Geoff Kershner, new President of Virginians for the Arts (VFTA), to provide public comment.

Geoff Kershner shared that VFTA has expanded their Board with new members and are adding term limits to the by-laws, along with increased flexibility in membership costs. On the communications front, they are upgrading their website, which will promote the arts license plate, and Jay Dick will be returning to lead advocacy workshops. Geoff noted that VFTA has activities planned around the next Arts Advocacy Day on January 22, 2026. He noted that his recent appointment to the Mid Atlantic Arts Board will enable him to keep the VCA informed about regional developments.

Chair Parker announced Abigail Gump’s departure as VCA’s legal counsel and noted that a new representative from the Attorney General’s office will be taking on the role soon. She shared upcoming calendar dates for the remaining FY26 Commission Board meetings.

- December 10, 2025 – Virtual
- March 11 – 12, 2026 – Norfolk
- June 16 – 17, 2026 – Richmond

### **XIII. Adjournment**

Chair Parker called for a motion to adjourn the September Board Meeting.

Commissioner: Flowers  
Commissioner: Armstrong  
All approved, motion passed

The meeting adjourned at 12:13 p.m.