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# AASLH Board Orientation Organizer

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## INTRODUCTION

Welcome to service on the Board of Directors. You join tens of thousands of people throughout the United States and Canada who contribute time, money, and expertise to historical organizations as members of a governing board. Of all the contributions board members make, none is more important than the credibility they provide to the good name and reputation of the organizations they serve. Historical organizations depend on the trust and confidence of the public for their support. The credibility of the organization begins with its leaders. To help you offer solid leadership, the American Association for State and Local History (AASLH) has prepared brief summaries of key board roles and responsibilities for inclusion in your *AASLH Board Orientation Organizer*.

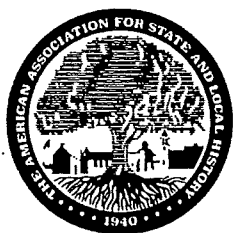
Board members of historical organizations are volunteers who receive no salary for their service. Ethical and legal standards prohibit financial gain from service on the board of non-profit organizations, including historical organizations. Board members receive many other rewards through their work with historical organizations. They have opportunities to understand the inner-workings of historical organizations which are often unknown to the general public, to gain friendships with people who share a commitment to public service, and always, to learn more about history. Perhaps the greatest reward comes from the fulfillment of contributing to the present success and future security of an important cultural institution.

The board of an historical organization should include members who reflect the diversity of people in the state, region, or community the organization serves and who bring a variety of different experiences and expertise to the board. A diversity of backgrounds and expertise will add valuable perspectives to the collective decisions a board of directors must make.

Individually, board members must use their expertise to address the specific and distinct demands of a non-profit organization. For example, some methods from business may translate well into historical organizations, but a business person on the board must recognize that its non-profit status means that an historical organization cannot and should not always operate like a business. Similarly, scholarly contributions from academic history should inform the work of historical organizations, but a history professor on the board must recognize that an educational organization serving the general public cannot and should not always present history in the complexity and detail of scholarly publications. A board member's special expertise will be an asset to an historical organization, but each board member will be valued most for the ability to make reasoned and honest judgments about the best interests of the organization.

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The American Association for State and Local History is a nonprofit educational membership organization dedicated to advancing knowledge, understanding, and appreciation of local history in the United States and Canada. To join AASLH, contact the Membership Director, AASLH, 530 Church Street, Suite 600, Nashville, TN 37219-2325 or call 615/255-2971.



*The AASLH Board Orientation Organizer* was developed by the Field Services Alliance. The Alliance brings together field services professionals from throughout North America who provide advice and assistance to county, local and specialized historical organizations. The Field Services Alliance shares with the American Association for State and Local History a commitment to support those who preserve and interpret historical resources, and to foster growth and development of historical organizations and personnel at every level of expertise. Tom McKay, local history coordinator at the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, authored *The AASLH Board Orientation Organizer* with critical review from members of the Field Services Alliance. AASLH wishes to thank Mr. McKay and the Field Services Alliance for their contributions to the field of state and local history.

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# BOARD FUNCTIONS

## **1. Hold safe the assets of the organization.**

These assets include the organization's financial holdings, real property, historic collections, copyrights, and reputation. Each type of asset requires different treatment and different forms of board oversight. The board should work collectively to provide oversight, and individual board members should abide by the AASLH Statement of Professional Ethics. Board members accept the responsibility to avoid conflicts of interest and obey all state and federal laws governing service on a non-profit board of directors.

## **2. Secure support for the organization.**

Historical organizations need support through financial contributions, volunteer service, and community participation in programs and activities. Board members should seek and provide each type of support. Each board member will make different contributions to the support of the organization based on personal resources of time, money, and relationships within the community.

## **3. Ensure proper delegation of authority within the organization.**

Successful operation of an historical organization requires the work of many people in varied positions of responsibility. The individuals who fill these positions may include officers, staff members, and/or volunteers. The positions of officers, board members, and chairs of standing committees are established in the organization's bylaws or constitution. Board members guarantee that the organization follows the procedures for elections and appointments provided in these documents. An active historical organization may have many committees appointed by the president and subcommittees appointed by committee chairs. The board monitors committee activity through receipt of written and oral reports. In historical organizations with staff members, the board delegates selection and supervision of staff to the executive director. Board functions with respect to the executive director's position include hiring and discharging, deciding terms of employment, entering into a contract, and evaluating performance.

## **4. Set policies that advance the organization's stated purpose.**

A board of directors sets policies related to the management of an historical organization and to the services it provides to fulfill its stated purpose. A board assumes responsibility for setting policies but rarely develops policies entirely on its own. Recommendations of staff and committees, advice of outside experts, provisions of state and federal law, and suggestions of constituent groups may play important roles in developing particular policies. The board votes final approval of all policies.

The fundamental principles and procedures of an historical organization are established in its bylaws or constitution. The board guarantees that the organization abides by these documents.

**5. Monitor the implementation of policies.**

Responsibility for policies does not end with approval. Through the review and acceptance of reports, observation of the organization's activities, examination of audits, and participation in regular and special meetings, a board ensures that the organization is following policy decisions. Individual board members accept the responsibility to remain informed about all matters of policy subject to board oversight.

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# COLLECTIONS

Most historical organizations hold collections. These may include objects, paper records, photographs and graphic images, audio and electronic materials, published materials, and historic structures. Historical organizations own collections as a means of preserving history. Making collections accessible to researchers serves to advance knowledge of history.

## **1. Hold safe the assets of the organization.**

Collections are historical assets. Although collections have financial value, boards make decisions about collections based on their use as historical assets and not their financial value. As trustees of these historical assets, historical organizations should authorize acquisition or disposal of any collection items through a vote of the board. A board can consider action on more than one collection item at a time by asking a designated staff or committee member to submit a collections report to its regular meetings. The board can vote approval, amendment, or rejection of the full report. Custodianship of collections also requires historical organizations to provide adequate security, climate control, and housekeeping procedures in areas containing collections.

## **2. Secure support for the organization.**

The board should approve a budget with expenditures for collections care and climate control and participate in securing funding for the budget.

## **3. Ensure proper delegation of authority within the organization.**

The cataloging, management, preservation, and daily care of collections are responsibilities delegated to a paid staff, appointed committee, or designated volunteers. Conservation treatments should be performed by a trained conservator hired as a staff member or paid as a contract service.

## **4. Set policies that advance the organization's stated purpose.**

Every historical organization should have a written collections policy. The collections policy establishes criteria for inclusion of items in the collection and states procedures for acquiring and disposing of collection items. The board may seek assistance from staff, committee members, or outside experts in developing a collections policy. Approval of the policy and any subsequent amendments should be authorized by a vote of the board.

Historical organizations should have established hours and written rules that allow and govern access to collections by researchers. The board should seek advice from appropriate staff and committee members in developing policies for access. The policies should be authorized by a vote of the board.

## **5. Monitor the implementation of policies.**

The following questions can help monitor implementation of policies and overall collections performance:

Does the organization have standard deed of gift, accession, and loan forms?

Does the organization create and update collection records in a timely manner?

Does the organization provide collection storage areas that are separate and secure from public access areas?

Does the organization provide appropriate climate control in areas where collections are located?

Do collections contribute to the mission of the organization?

Do the collections represent the diversity of people and events related to the organization's statement of purpose?

Does the organization adhere to the established hours and written rules that allow access to the collections by researchers?

Does the organization follow its collections policy?

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# EXHIBITS

Historical organizations use collections to create long-term and temporary exhibits in their own museums and historic sites or traveling exhibits for loan to other institutions. They may also borrow traveling exhibits created by other institutions. The three most common formats for the content of historical exhibits are interpreting historical themes, presenting special collections, and recreating historic settings. Many historical organizations use exhibits as a primary means of disseminating history to the public.

## **1. Hold safe the assets of the organization.**

Exhibits make major contributions to the reputation of an historical organization. In considering public response to an historical organization's exhibits, the board should concern itself with the overall impact of the exhibit program rather than making judgments based on any single exhibit.

Exhibits create some risk to collections. When insurance is used as part of risk management, the board should receive reports documenting the selection of insurance coverage for collections or exhibits.

## **2. Secure support for the organization.**

The board should approve a budget with expenditures for exhibits and participate in securing funding for the budget.

Board members should lend support by visiting exhibits, attending openings, and encouraging others to visit the exhibits.

## **3. Ensure proper delegation of authority within the organization.**

The selection, planning, and preparation of exhibits are operations delegated to a paid staff, appointed committee, or designated volunteers. The board should also delegate compliance with safety codes and disability access laws for exhibit space to a paid staff or appointed committee.

## **4. Set policies that advance the organization's stated purpose.**

The definition of geographical or thematic areas of interest contained in an historical organization's statement of purpose is the most important expression of policy guiding its exhibits. The allocation of space for long-term, temporary, and traveling exhibits also represents a policy decision. All major plans for exhibit space allocation, alteration, or additions should be submitted to a vote of the board. Schedules of hours and fees for visitation govern access to exhibits. The board should vote on recommendations developed by a paid staff or appointed committee for the organization's hours

and fees, if any, for public visitation.

**5. Monitor the implementation of policies.**

The following questions can help monitor implementation of policies and overall exhibits performance:

Does the organization create long-term, temporary, or traveling exhibits related to the history of the geographical or thematic areas of interest identified in its statement of purpose?

Do the exhibits created by the organization adequately represent the diversity of people and events in the history of its geographical or thematic areas of interest?

Do significant numbers of visitors attend the organization's exhibits?

Do the exhibit spaces comply with safety codes?

Do the exhibit spaces comply with provisions of the Americans with Disabilities Act?

Does the organization create furnishing plans or research reports for recreated settings?

Does the organization create planning files or research reports for interpretive exhibits and special collections exhibits?

Does the organization maintain long-term exhibits in good condition?



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# PUBLICATIONS

Historical organizations may produce publications such as books, magazines, newsletters, films, videotapes, and electronic media. The board should recognize that publications serve two distinct purposes: to publicize the activities of the organization and to disseminate history. The board should be aware of these distinctions even if the two functions are combined in a single publication. Publishing historical books or articles is a primary method of encouraging research to advance knowledge of history.

**1. Hold safe the assets of the organization.**

Publications can strengthen the reputation of an historical organization. Board oversight should consider the overall impact of publications on the organization's reputation rather than making judgments based on any single article or publication.

Publications can require substantial monetary investments. To safeguard financial assets, long-term contracts and major expenditures for publications should be submitted to a vote of the board. The board should also examine publications and receive reports to document ownership of copyrights.

**2. Secure support for the organization.**

The board should approve a budget with expenditures for publications and participate in securing funding for the budget.

**3. Ensure proper delegation of authority within the organization.**

The solicitation, writing, editing, and preparation of materials for publication are operations delegated to a paid staff, appointed committee, or designated volunteers. The board should also delegate completion of copyright procedures to a paid staff or appointed committee.

**4. Set policies that advance the organization's statement of purpose.**

The geographical or thematic area of interest contained in an historical organization's statement of purpose is the most important expression of policy guiding its publications. Members of historical organizations may receive its publications on special terms as a membership benefit. In conjunction with a paid staff or appointed committee, the board should develop policies establishing publication schedules and prices of publications for members and non-members.

## **5. Monitor the implementation of policies.**

The following questions can help monitor implementation of policies and overall publications performance:

Do publications appear in a timely manner?

Do publications contain historical articles related to the organization's geographical or thematic areas of interest identified in its statement of purpose?

Do publications produced by the organization represent the diversity of people and events in the history of its geographical or thematic areas of interest?

Does the organization present news of its activities through its publications?

Do the organization's publications appear with printed copyright?

Does the organization print publications in amounts appropriate to the number it can distribute or sell?

Do the organization's publications appropriately cite use of materials from other copyrighted sources?

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# PUBLIC PROGRAMS

Historical organizations present public programs that may include speakers, tours, awards ceremonies, workshops, seminars, and classes. Public programs can help an historical organization serve a broad spectrum of people in a variety of age groups. Public programs are a means of attracting interest to the organization and disseminating history to the public.

## **1. Hold safe the assets of the organization.**

Public programs can strengthen the reputation of an historical organization. Board oversight should consider the combined impact of its public programs on the organization's reputation rather than making judgments based on any single program.

Many public programs and events create additional liability risks for an historical organization. The board should receive plans and reports documenting that risks are prudent and that the organization has liability insurance appropriate to the risks.

## **2. Secure support for the organization.**

The board should approve a budget with expenditures for public programs and should participate in securing funding for the budget.

Board members should lend support by attending public programs and encouraging others to attend.

## **3. Ensure proper delegation of authority within the organization.**

The selection, planning, and presentation of public programs are operations delegated to a paid staff, appointed committee, or designated volunteers. The board should also delegate compliance with disability access laws for public programs to a paid staff, appointed committee, or designated volunteers.

## **4. Set policies that advance the organization's stated purpose.**

The geographical or thematic area of interest contained in an historical organization's statement of purpose is the most important expression of policy guiding its public programs. Members of historical organizations often can attend public programs at a reduced price as a benefit of membership. In conjunction with a paid staff or appointed committee, the board should develop policies governing admission prices for members and non-members to attend public programs.

**5. Monitor the implementation of policies.**

The following questions can help monitor implementation of policies and overall public programs performance:

Does the organization offer public programs related to the history of the geographical or thematic area of interest identified in its statement of purpose?

Do the public programs of the organization adequately represent the diversity of people and events in the history of its geographical or thematic area of interest?

Do significant numbers of people attend the organization's public programs?

Do the public programs comply with the provisions of the Americans with Disabilities Act?

Does the organization carry adequate liability insurance for each of its public programs?

Does the organization determine fees, if any, for public programs based on both the responsibility to ensure its fiscal stability and the responsibility to make its programs broadly accessible?

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# MANAGEMENT

An historical organization must manage financial, human, and real property resources to fulfill its stated purpose. As non-profit, educational institutions, historical organizations manage their resources in the public interest. Proper management of resources includes maintaining good organizational records.

## **1. Hold safe the assets of the organization.**

The financial assets of an historical organization should provide a stable base for its operations. Annual budgets, capital budgets, major expenditures, and investment proposals are authorized by a vote of the board. To maintain proper financial records, the board receives treasurer's reports which are submitted to the full board for approval. The board should also initiate periodic audits.

Maintaining official records helps to safeguard the reputation of an historical organization. The board receives minutes of its meetings prepared by its secretary and submits the minutes to the full board for approval. Historical organizations retain board and committee minutes, treasurer's reports, and audit reports as permanent records.

The real property owned by an historical organization often represents its most expensive asset. The board should receive reports or review copies of contracts documenting that the organization has insurance to cover the risks from fire, storm, and liability associated with the ownership of real property.

## **2. Secure support for the organization.**

The board should approve operating and capital budgets and participate in securing funding for the budgets. Board members should accept appointments to finance, personnel, building and grounds, or other standing committees that require participation of board members.

## **3. Ensure proper delegation of authority within the organization.**

The management of operating and capital budgets and the payment of bills are delegated to the treasurer or chief financial officer. Management of program expenditures or line items within operating or capital budgets may be delegated to paid staff, appointed committees, or designated volunteers. The board should delegate the management of investment accounts to an appointed committee or a contracted financial service.

In historical organizations with paid staff, the board selects the executive director. The board may delegate supervision of the executive director to a personnel committee or executive committee. Selection and supervision of other employees are delegated to the executive director. The board also delegates compliance with state and federal

employment regulations to the personnel committee or paid staff.

Maintenance and management of real property are operations delegated to a paid staff or appointed committee.

**4. Set policies that advance the organization's stated purpose.**

The board should develop and approve policies for expenditure authority. The policies should establish the authority for staff, committees, or volunteers to expend funds within the limits of approved budgets. The policies should set expenditure limits which can be exceeded only by a vote of the board and should designate which organization officials or staff are authorized to sign checks. The board should vote on all long-term contracts and capital expenditures. The board should receive and vote on acceptance of reports about financial management of all investments.

Personnel policies developed in conjunction with a personnel committee or paid staff should be authorized by a vote of the board. The board should approve the terms of employment and contract for the executive director, if one is employed.

All purchases of real property and major plans for allocation, alteration, or additions for real property should be authorized by a vote of the board.

**5. Monitor the implementation of policies.**

The following questions can help monitor implementation of policies and overall management performance:

Does the organization have an approved operating budget?

Does the organization purchase appropriate insurance coverage?

Does the organization maintain secretary's minutes, treasurer's reports, and auditor's reports as permanent records?

Does the board receive reports on investment accounts?

Does the organization maintain real property in good condition?

Does the board approve the executive director's contract?

Does the organization have a written personnel policy?

Does the organization comply with state and federal laws such as those governing employment, tax codes, safety, and non-profit organizations?