

Testimony to House Government Operations & Military Affairs
Vermont Arts and Culture Disaster and Resilience Network
Amy Cunningham, Deputy Director, Vermont Arts Council

We appreciate this opportunity to share about the [Vermont Arts and Culture Disaster and Resilience Network](#) (VACDaRN), a partnership of the Vermont Arts Council and the Vermont State Archives and Records Administration, that works to build the strength and resilience of Vermont's vital cultural sector. Through the network, artists and cultural organizations work together to share expertise and resources, mobilize response for mutual assistance during emergencies, and engage collectively with first responders and government emergency management agencies.

We are here today as a part of the Vermont Creative Network's Creative Sector Day. Vermont's creative sector—that's all of the businesses, nonprofits, and individuals whose work is rooted in creativity—is a significant driver of our state's economy. In 2022, arts and culture was an almost \$1.2 billion dollar industry in Vermont. The creative sector strengthens communities, brings people together, and builds our economy.

Established in 2019, VACDaRN offers trainings, support, and direct assistance. The steering team includes representation from key statewide resource groups and critical expertise in specialized cultural recovery areas. VACDaRN operates as a "network of networks," leveraging existing relationships and contact lists and coordinating communications efforts. VACDaRN is a strong example of inter-agency and cross-sector collective effort. Steering team members include

- Vermont State Archives and Records Administration (co-leads): Rachel Onuf and Jane Cadwalader
- Vermont Arts Council (co-leads): Amy Cunningham and Michele Bailey
- Vermont Emergency Management: Taiga Christie
- Vermont State Historic Preservation Office: Laura Trieschmann and Jamie Duggan
- Vermont Department of Libraries: Tom McMurdo
- Vermont Humanities Council: Noel Clark
- Vermont Historical Society: Eileen Corcoran
- Paper Conservation, National Heritage Responder: Carolyn Frisa
- Middlebury College Libraries: Joseph Watson
- Smithsonian Cultural Rescue Initiative: Katelynn Averyt
- University of Vermont, School of the Arts and Waking Windows: Paddy Reagan

After the historic flooding of 2023 and again in 2024, the [VACDaRN steering team](#) activated to deploy assistance to artists and cultural organizations, providing immediate expertise for conservation needs for impacted cultural heritage materials, supporting the FEMA process, and connecting the sector with Vermont's emergency management response. Our work included:

- Activating the VACDaRN steering team, using our collective networks to catalog damage and needs around the state (through 1:1 outreach and a survey form)
- [Deploying National Heritage Responders and other conservators](#) to sites with damaged collections for salvage and stabilization work (and have secured \$25K to cover some of the treatment costs)

- Serving as the de facto “Historical and Cultural Restoration Task Force” which is a required committee for the State’s long term recovery planning efforts
- Providing outreach to help flood impacted individuals and organizations in the sector to know what kind of state and federal resources were available to help (including a webinar for cultural organizations with FEMA and VEM reps)
- Coordinating with the Smithsonian Cultural Rescue Initiative to offer [workshops about saving family treasures](#) after the flood
- Coordinating funding needs among partners to avoid duplication of effort:
 - Vermont Humanities secured private and NEH funding to distribute \$400,000 in support to flood-damaged cultural organizations
 - We served as advisors to the Vermont Community Foundation flood grants team on funding needs and opportunities in the creative sector
 - VAC stood up an artist relief grant program, granting out \$67,756
 - We secured other private donations that funded salvage and treatment of funded damaged art and historical collections

Other recent work includes:

- A statewide Day of Learning last September in Barre which provided practical tips and training, resilience and relationship building for nearly 100 artists, cultural workers, emergency managers and others. [Read our recap of the day](#), and view [recordings of training sessions](#) from the day on the VACDaRN website.
- The Culture for Climate Action Series, presented in partnership with UMass Amherst Arts Extension service, provided training on climate resilience for over 20 of Vermont’s cultural organizations.

As we look towards long-term recovery, the VACDaRN team is focused on:

- Continued support/strengthening of the VACDaRN network, including improved contacts lists and asset mapping.
- Continued emphasis on preparedness—trainings and support to create emergency plans and continuity of operations plans.
- We are also interested in the ways that our cultural infrastructure can be an asset in preparing for future emergencies—for example, how might we involve the town library and the performing arts space in local emergency management planning to enable them to provide support during a disaster?
- Advocating and funding for arts and culture initiatives that promote collective healing and recovery in communities around the state.

Our many cultural assets—from painters and performers to theaters and historic sites—are vital in making Vermont a place where people want to visit, live, and stay. The arts also serve as a helpful tool for rebuilding community fabric and processing collective grief after traumatic events. VACDaRN is committed to helping these cultural assets weather the next storm so that they can continue to serve their communities.