State of Associations 2024

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Key findings

- **690 member organizations responded**, fielded with Fieldstone Data Partners between November 2023 and January 2024.
- **Median membership growth held at 2.1 percent** across the full sample.
- **Median renewal came in at 93 percent**, the report's other headline figure.
- Non-dues revenue accounts for a median of 24 percent of total budget, with wide variation by sector.
- Median annual staff turnover across responding organizations was 14 percent.
- 61 percent of responding organizations reported a formal, board-approved strategic plan.

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Why NANA built this report

Association staff have never lacked data about their own organization. What most have lacked is a number to measure it against. Before this report, an executive director could say her association's membership grew 2 percent last year, but had no reliable way to know whether

that made her organization typical, ahead of the field, or falling behind.

NANA's mission includes research alongside peer community and advocacy, and Director of Research Inês Carvalho-Reyes said the idea for an annual benchmarking survey came directly from conversations with member organizations before she joined NANA's staff. "Every association I talked to said some version of the same thing: they wanted to know if they were normal. Not exceptional. Normal."

How the survey was fielded

NANA fielded the survey with Fieldstone Data Partners, a benchmarking data and survey-tooling firm that specializes in association research. The questionnaire took nine months to design, field, and analyze, beginning with interviews of a dozen member organizations about what they most wanted to compare against peers. Staff size and renewal rate came up in nearly every interview, which is why both anchor this report's headline findings.

Fieldstone Data Partners handled distribution and response validation, cross-checking self-reported membership figures against publicly available Form 990 data where an organization had filed one. Responses that couldn't be validated were excluded rather than adjusted — a deliberate choice to keep the dataset honest even at the cost of a smaller sample. The final sample of 690 organizations spans eleven sectors, three staff-size bands, and NANA's six chapter regions.

The headline numbers

Median membership growth across the 690 responding organizations was 2.1 percent for the twelve months ending in each organization's most recent fiscal year. Median renewal — the share of members who renewed at their most recent billing cycle — was 93 percent.

CEO Walter Abernathy, who co-authored the report, said the two figures should be read together rather than separately. "A 93 percent renewal rate sounds strong until you see it next to 2.1 percent growth. Most associations aren't shrinking. They're also not expanding the way many boards assume they should be. This report gives boards a realistic number to plan against instead of an aspirational one."

Growth and renewal by sector

Growth varied more by sector than any other variable in the survey. Health care and education associations reported the highest median growth, both above 3 percent, while associations in manufacturing and shipping sectors reported growth closer to flat, in the 0.5 to 1 percent range. Agricultural, financial-services, and arts-and-culture associations clustered close to the overall 2.1 percent median, and the remaining sectors surveyed — including libraries, natural resources, and skilled trades — spread across the full range between the fastest- and slowest-growing sectors without a clear pattern of their own.

Renewal rates showed less sector variation, clustering between 90 and 95 percent across all eleven sectors surveyed. Even the slowest-growing sectors in the survey — manufacturing and shipping — reported renewal rates within the same 90-to-95 range as the fastest-growing ones, reinforcing the report's central point that growth and renewal answer different questions about an association's health.

Growth and renewal by staff size

Organizations with fewer than ten staff reported the widest spread in both growth and renewal

— some of the fastest-growing organizations in the sample were also among the smallest, as were some of the slowest. This size band's variance likely reflects how much a single new-member recruitment push or a single lost renewal can move the percentage at a small organization, where the base is small enough that individual decisions carry outsized statistical weight.

Mid-sized organizations, staffed between ten and twenty-five, clustered closest to the sample median on both measures, showing the least spread of the three bands. Organizations with more than twenty-five staff reported the most consistent renewal rates, typically within two points of the 93 percent median, but grew more slowly on average — a pattern consistent with larger, more mature organizations having less headroom for rapid membership expansion than newer or smaller ones.

Growth and renewal by region

Matching NANA's six chapter footprints, the Southeast and Pacific Northwest regions reported the highest median growth, both above the 2.1 percent overall median. The Great Lakes and Rocky Mountain regions reported growth closer to the median, and the Mid-Atlantic and Greater Boston regions reported growth slightly below it, though within a narrow enough band that the report does not treat the difference as a meaningful regional effect on its own. Renewal rates were consistent across all six regions, varying by less than three points from the sample-wide figure — the flattest pattern of any cross-section in the report.

Staff turnover

Median annual staff turnover across the sample was 14 percent, with the highest turnover concentrated among membership and events staff — the roles most directly exposed to renewal-cycle and meeting-season workload spikes. Finance and operations roles reported the lowest turnover of any category tracked. Organizations reporting turnover above 20 percent were disproportionately likely to also report renewal rates below the sample median, though the survey cannot establish which factor drives the other: high turnover could weaken renewal by disrupting member relationships, or organizations already struggling with renewal could be the same ones losing staff to burnout.

Non-dues revenue

Non-dues revenue — sponsorship, event registration, and product sales, among other sources — made up a median of 24 percent of total budget across the sample. The share ranged widely: organizations with an annual conference or trade show reported non-dues revenue above 35 percent of budget in many cases, while organizations without a signature annual event reported closer to 10 percent. Event revenue was the single largest non-dues category reported, ahead of sponsorship and product or publication sales, a finding the research team plans to examine in more detail in a future State of Associations Quarterly brief.

Strategic planning

61 percent of responding organizations reported having a current, board-approved strategic plan. Organizations with a plan reported higher median growth (2.6 percent) than organizations without one (1.4 percent), though again the survey measures association, not causation. Smaller organizations were less likely to report a current plan than larger ones, with the gap widest among organizations under ten staff, where competing operational demands more often crowd out formal planning work.

Methodology and limitations

This report measures self-reported figures from responding organizations, validated against Form 990 data where available, rather than an independent audit of every organization's books. Organizations that chose to respond to the survey may differ systematically from those that didn't — an association already tracking its own growth and renewal numbers closely enough to report them confidently may also be more likely to have plans, staff, and practices that produce stronger numbers. The research team treats this report as the sector's best available benchmark, not a definitive census, and expects the picture to sharpen as more organizations join future editions.

The report also does not establish causation anywhere it reports an association between two figures — strategic planning and growth, staff turnover and renewal, or any other pairing. Readers should treat these as documented patterns worth investigating in their own organization, not as proof that changing one figure will move the other.

What board members asked for

Before finalizing the survey instrument, NANA's research team interviewed board members alongside staff, since board members often set the targets staff are then measured against. Board members asked most consistently for a number they could cite in a board meeting without staff having to defend it as anecdotal — which is the origin of this report's emphasis on median figures reported plainly, without editorializing about whether a given number is good or bad in isolation.

Several board members specifically asked for staff-size and sector breakdowns, having been frustrated in the past by a single national average that told them nothing about whether their own organization's size and sector made a given growth rate realistic. Those breakdowns are why this report leads with them rather than treating the headline sample-wide figures as sufficient on their own.

How to use this report

NANA's guidance to members reading this report: find your sector and staff-size band, then compare your own renewal and growth figures against the median for that group rather than the headline number for all 690 organizations. A national median of 2.1 percent growth means little to a manufacturing-sector association if that sector's median is running closer to zero, and just as little to a health care association whose sector is growing at 3 percent or better.

Boards should also read the staff-turnover and non-dues-revenue findings alongside growth and renewal rather than in isolation. An association reporting renewal at or above the 93 percent median but staff turnover well above the 14 percent median is arguably in a more fragile position than the renewal number alone suggests, since sustained turnover in membership-facing roles has historically preceded, not followed, a decline in renewal in the organizations the research team examined most closely while building this report.

What comes next

NANA plans to field this survey every year in early spring and publish results in March, giving member organizations a running benchmark rather than a one-time snapshot. Fieldstone Data Partners will continue as the fielding partner for future editions, and NANA's research team expects to add year-over-year trend data once a second edition is complete. The State of Associations Quarterly series, launching alongside this report, will track individual themes from the annual survey — renewal timing, event registration, non-dues revenue, and staffing — in shorter data briefs between annual editions.

Carvalho-Reyes said the research team's biggest open question heading into a second edition is whether this year's figures hold steady, drift, or move sharply once a full year of comparison data exists. "One year of data tells you where the sector stands. Two years starts to tell you where it's headed. That's the report I actually want to publish, and this one is what makes it possible."

Member organizations that responded to this first fielding will be invited back for the 2025 edition before the survey opens to the broader membership, giving the research team a matched cohort to build the first year-over-year comparison from.