State of Associations Quarterly: 2025 Q2

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Key findings

- **57 percent of responding organizations engaged in at least one federal advocacy action** in the twelve months before the survey — a letter, a Hill meeting, or formal comment on a rulemaking.
- **Advocacy Day accounts for the largest single share of first-time participation**: 41 percent of organizations reporting their first-ever federal advocacy action did so through NANA's own Advocacy Day.
- Organizations with a designated policy or government-relations staff role engage in advocacy at more than double the rate of organizations without one — 84 percent versus 39 percent — regardless of overall staff size.
- Repeat participation is high once an organization starts: 78 percent of first-time Advocacy Day attendees from 2024 registered again for 2025.

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Why this brief, and why now

Advocacy Day 2025 drew 210 members to Washington for 96 Hill meetings — a number NANA reports every year. What that annual figure doesn't show is how much of the sector's federal advocacy activity happens outside that single day, and how organizations that have never engaged with a member of Congress start.

NANA's research team pulled advocacy-participation questions from the same benchmarking survey behind State of Associations, isolating a question the annual report doesn't dwell on: not how many members grew or renewed, but how many engaged with federal policy at all.

What the data shows

Fifty-seven percent of responding organizations engaged in at least one federal advocacy action in the twelve months before the survey — a Hill meeting, a formal comment letter, or direct

outreach to a federal agency. That share held steady across organization size bands, which surprised the research team going in; Director of Research Inês Carvalho-Reyes expected larger organizations with dedicated policy staff to dominate the figure.

"We assumed the smaller organizations would mostly sit this out," Carvalho-Reyes said. "They don't. What predicts participation isn't size — it's whether someone on staff owns the file."

What predicts participation

Organizations with a designated policy or government-relations staff role — even a shared or part-time one — engaged in advocacy at more than double the rate of organizations without one: 84 percent versus 39 percent. That gap held regardless of overall staff size, meaning a five-person association with one staffer who owns advocacy outperforms a twenty-person association where the function is nobody's clear responsibility.

Sector mattered less than staffing structure. Health care, financial services, and agriculture associations reported the highest overall participation, but the gap between organizations with and without designated policy staff was wider than the gap between any two sectors.

The Advocacy Day on-ramp

For organizations reporting their first-ever federal advocacy action, 41 percent did so through NANA's own Advocacy Day — by far the largest single entry point into federal engagement, ahead of independent Hill visits, agency rulemaking comments, or coalition sign-on letters combined.

Carvalho-Reyes's team attributes the concentration to Advocacy Day's structure: NANA's policy team builds the schedule, drafts the leave-behind material, and groups attendees by state delegation, removing most of the logistical and substantive preparation a first-time participant would otherwise need to do alone. "The barrier to a first Hill visit usually isn't interest," Carvalho-Reyes said. "It's not knowing how to book the meeting or what to say once you're in the room. Advocacy Day removes both."

Once they start, they keep going

Seventy-eight percent of organizations that attended Advocacy Day for the first time in 2024 registered again for 2025, a repeat rate the research team calls unusually high for a single annual event. Organizations that did not return most often cited a change in staff — the person who attended left the organization — rather than dissatisfaction with the event itself.

That finding points policy staff toward a specific retention risk: advocacy participation at smaller organizations often depends on one person's institutional knowledge rather than an organizational habit. When that person leaves, the organization's advocacy engagement can lapse entirely rather than transferring to a successor.

What this means for policy staff

Director of Public Policy Simone Radcliffe's team reads this brief's findings as validation of Advocacy Day's design and a prompt to close a specific gap: onboarding continuity when a first-time attendee's role turns over. NANA's policy team plans to add a short "advocacy handoff" note to the Advocacy Day Participant Guide, encouraging attendees to loop in a successor or colleague before they leave a role, so participation survives a staffing change rather than resetting to zero.

Associations without a designated policy role should read the 84-versus-39-percent gap as the brief's most actionable finding: even a small, shared advocacy responsibility appears to matter more than overall staff capacity in determining whether an organization shows up in Washington at all.

The research team plans to repeat this question in the 2026 annual survey to see whether the 57 percent participation figure moves, and whether the designated-staff gap narrows as more organizations without a policy role attend their first Advocacy Day and, per this brief's findings, largely keep coming back.

Members with questions about this brief's methodology, or who want to flag their own organization's advocacy activity for a future survey cycle, can reach NANA's research team directly rather than waiting for the next fielding window to open. A one-page methodology note is available on request for members citing this brief in their own board materials.