



## From the President & CEO

# We Know Small is Mighty

**H**ow many small history organizations are there? No one has the precise number, though it's certainly in the thousands. We do know that small organizations make up over half the field. Those with budgets less than \$250,000 were more than 50 percent of the respondents to our "National Visitation Survey" and are more than 50 percent of AASLH's membership. Half of the institutions in this group actually have budgets of \$50,000 or less.

We also know that small history organizations face challenges and frustrations which are multiplied by the thousands of single instances in which they occur, from Texas to New Hampshire to Virginia to British Columbia. Wherever there is a proverbial lone staff member wearing a dozen or more hats, or budgets do not cover the upkeep of buildings and expansive collections, or pools of volunteers are shrinking, there is a challenge. A discussion thread on AASLH's Small Museums listserv last December highlighted other ways in which institutions are struggling, such as staff burnout and the pressures of high expectations from boards and the field. Contributors to this particular thread noted that expecting small organizations to seek accreditation or to adhere to national standards is akin to throwing a blizzard of straw at an overloaded camel.

Another way to look at standards, however, is that they can help small organizations focus and prioritize their work. That has been the proven idea behind AASLH's StEPs (Standards and Excellence Program for History Organizations) for the past ten years. It's also in the enhanced version we will be releasing in 2020.

There is much to learn from colleagues at smaller institutions. AASLH's inaugural *National Visitation Report* (November 2019) revealed that while history organizations nationwide have experienced visitation growth over the past several years, the most dramatic increases have been at the smallest places. Those with a budget of \$50,000 or less saw the greatest gain: an 18 percent increase in visitors between 2013 and 2018. Those with budgets between \$50,000 and \$250,000 experienced a 12.7 percent increase. The average for all institutions was 5.7 percent. Sometimes, smaller organizations can make big improvements more quickly than their peers. An all-volunteer run institution, for example, might lack the convenience of a paid staff, but it also might

be benefitting from the leadership of deeply experienced and wildly passionate volunteers. A small organization with a small budget will not have the grander-scale resources, staffing, stakeholders, or programming of larger institutions, but then a smaller institution might be more nimble and able to adapt. A lone staff member, in sync with a focused board, can move the needle quickly.

AASLH knows that small is mighty and that we all have much to learn from colleagues doing similar work on different scales and with different budgets. We value small history organizations and their vital contributions to their communities and the field. In building a more comprehensive, coherent, and clear program of professional development opportunities over the next year, we will be emphasizing the needs of staff at these organizations.

AASLH staff and program committees will redouble their efforts, in conjunction with the Field Services Alliance and other partners, to offer workshops and sessions that serve small museums and other history organizations. AASLH will be making its online Resource Center more easily navigable so that the guides, best practices, training recordings, and Technical Leaflets we have long compiled are more readily available. When the new enhanced version of StEPs rolls out in the spring, you will notice we are using it as an organizing principle for all our continuing education programs. It will become apparent in the Annual Meeting, our 250th anniversary planning efforts, research projects, and more, that we are aligning with StEPs, similar to the way that we are aligning our programs around inclusion and relevance.

AASLH was created nearly eighty years ago not only to bring together leaders of major state and local institutions across the country and to provide tools, professional development, publications, and collegiality for all history organizations, but to ensure that the smallest and most remote institutions, the oldest and the newest, and their staff and volunteers were linked to our greater community. We are still here to facilitate that sharing of ideas.

Sincerely,

John R. Dicht  
President & CEO, AASLH