

# STEPS GROUPS

Bringing Local History Organizations Together  
for Networking and Shared Learning



Lorain Historical Society, Lorain, OH

## What is STEPS?

**STEPS (Standards and Excellence Program for History Organizations)** is the museum field's entry-level program to help small and mid-sized organizations improve their policies and practices.

## What is a STEPS Group?

A STEPS group is five or more history museums, historical societies, historic sites, or related institutions in regular contact and learning from each other as they use the STEPS program to assess their organizations' policies and practices, identify strengths, and plan for improvements.

## How Does the STEPS Program Work?

Enrollment in STEPS is a one-time fee of \$195. Organizations must be an AASLH institutional member for at least the first year of participation; membership is based on budget and begins at \$98 for budgets of less than \$50,000. The program is open to organizations of all sizes and types. There are no eligibility requirements nor is there an application to complete.

Participants receive a workbook that guides them through a series of self-assessment questions and performance indicators (Basic, Good, Better) in six areas: Mission, Vision and Governance; Audience; Interpretation; Stewardship of Collections; Stewardship of Historic Structures and Landscapes; Management. Other program components include a companion website and progress certificates (Bronze, Silver, Gold).

More than 1,000 organizations across the country are using STEPS as a structure for helping board members, volunteers and staff learn more about museum operations. You can read more about STEPS at [www.aaslh.org/programs/steps](http://www.aaslh.org/programs/steps)

## Who can Fund or Facilitate a STEPS Group?

Sponsors and funders have included state historical societies, humanities councils, community foundations, field service programs, state museum associations, tourism agencies, county agencies, individual museums, arts agencies, and others.

AASLH encourages park agencies, national heritage areas, historic house consortiums, and other specialty groups to form a STEPS group that helps organizations they serve increase sustainability, and work incrementally to meet national museum standards.

We also invite historical societies or museums that want to form their own STEPS group without an umbrella organization or agency to do so.

**"This program has been an amazing journey . . . it has given us direction, professional context and standards and a network of like institutions that share many of the same questions and quandaries."**

- Stonington Historical Society, CT



NMAAHC StEPs Cohort members at the Association of African American Museums' conference in 2019.

## A Group Model Works Well

### Working Within a STEPS Group Brings Organizations Together

Small- to mid-sized historical societies and museums often identify with one or more of the following situations:

- Small and often shoe-string budgets leave little funding for training and participation in statewide, regional or national workshops and conferences.
- Volunteers, board members, and staff, in rural areas especially, have little day-to-day contact with other history organizations so networking as a way to learn and problem-solve is sporadic.
- Rural areas also have an absence of easily accessible training events.
- Board members, staff, and volunteers often come to museum work from other professions and backgrounds so they may be unfamiliar with museum operations and national standards.

Any of the above situations can create an organization in need of guidance and fresh contact with peer institutions. Forming or joining a STEPS group can help meet those needs.



Greeneville Greene County Historical Society, Greeneville, TN

**“Find small museums in your area that are interested in working on STEPS too. Go through the sections together. It’s great camaraderie! You don’t feel so alone, and tackling problems and projects together is very rewarding.”**

- Tori Mason, Grassmere Historic Farm

## A Variety of STEPS Groups

STEPS groups vary by size, type of sponsor, geographic area covered, funding, and other factors. Here are some examples of STEPS groups:

The [Missouri Museum of History](#) provides leadership and guidance to metro area history museums and sites through its **St. Louis Area StEPs Working Group** ([www.aaslh.org/new-steps-group-mo](http://www.aaslh.org/new-steps-group-mo)). Participating organizations meet eight times during the year for dinner, a speaker, and discussion related to a topic in one of the six StEPs workbook sections.

In Massachusetts, the [Pioneer Valley History Network](#), a consortium of history organizations in Franklin, Hampden, and Hampshire counties, received funding from the Community Foundation of Western Massachusetts and Mass Humanities to work on StEPs with eight history organizations in a project titled **Future of Our Past** ([bit.ly/2Nz6ExN](http://bit.ly/2Nz6ExN)).

The longest running StEPs group: [Connecticut Humanities](#) and the Connecticut League of History Organizations with the Connecticut Historical Society. **StEPs-CT** (<https://bit.ly/2BJFHjD>) offers training, facilitated conversations, and mentoring. Organizations that complete the two-year program receive exclusive access to competitive grant funds. Results by participating organizations include revitalized mission statements, improved policies and procedures, strategic plans, and re-invigorated staff and board members. Read about the [Essex Historical Society](#) ([bit.ly/2UJ6IAI](http://bit.ly/2UJ6IAI)) as an exciting example of accomplishments.

[Utah Humanities](#), Utah Division of Arts & Museums, and the Utah Division of State History are partnering to pilot the **StEPs UT program** (<https://bit.ly/362Gqdz>) modeled after StEPs-CT. The program consists of six modules that follow the StEPs program workbook. Participating organizations take part in workshops and “watch & talk” sessions and receive an onsite visit from their mentor. The organizations are working toward the goal of achieving the Basic level in each StEPs workbook section.

The [National Museum of African American History and Culture](#) is partnering with AASLH to offer the NMAAHC StEPs Cohort for African American museums. Cohort members receive advice from a mentor visit and follow-up report and participate in webinars, phone chats, and attend both the AASLH and the Association of African American Museums national conferences. Read more about the cohort at [bit.ly/32NVuty](http://bit.ly/32NVuty).

**"STEPS gave us the opportunity to think creatively and permission to experiment. "**

Essex Historical Society,  
Essex, CT



Greeneville Greene County, Historical Society, Greeneville, TN

**StEPs for Ohio** is an initiative of the **Ohio History Connection's** Local History Office in partnership with AmeriCorps. StEPs for Ohio participants attend workshops, take part in webinars, and receive one-on-one consulting to gain solid footing in the StEPs program. Read about the Cleveland Gray's experience in the program at [bit.ly/2ZrFn2o](https://bit.ly/2ZrFn2o) as its Armory Museum created more effective policies and procedures and improved its interpretive and strategic planning.

**Ocean County Cultural & Heritage Commission** ([www.co.ocean.nj.us/ch](http://www.co.ocean.nj.us/ch)) in New Jersey is using funding from the New Jersey Historical Commission to award StEPs enrollment grants to ten local history organizations. Organizations receive additional funding for StEPs certificates they earn (\$100 for a Bronze; \$200 Silver; \$300 Gold) and points for workshop attendance with the points counting towards funding decisions in the next grant cycle.



Jackson County Historical Society, Independence, MO

AASLH received funding from the Community Foundation of Middle Tennessee to create a **Middle Tennessee StEPs group**. AASLH staff facilitated meetings with five local history groups for about three years. Read about group member **Grassmere Historic Farm** ([bit.ly/32Z9As4](https://bit.ly/32Z9As4)) and its experience using StEPs to gain solid footing as a historic site located within a zoo.

In **Washington State, 4Culture**, the cultural funding agency for King County, offered workshops, roundtables, mentor opportunities, and incentive-based funding as part of a program called StEPs 4Culture. More than forty local history organizations in the Seattle area took part in the program. Read more about the program at [www.4culture.org/?s=StEPs](http://www.4culture.org/?s=StEPs).

**Chester County Historical Society, Westchester, PA**, received funding from the RC Taylor Group to guide a group of local history organizations through a series of StEPs-based workshops. The Conservation Center for Art & Historic Artifacts was a project partner. Read more about the project at [bit.ly/31MkTT9](https://bit.ly/31MkTT9).

**The Alabama Department of Archives and History** worked with a small group of historic sites and museums to get started in the StEPs program.

**Hamilton County Education Leadership Program for Heritage Organizations (HELP)** in Carmel, Indiana offered enrollment in the StEPs program to improve sustainability of local heritage organizations in advance of Indiana's Bicentennial. Hamilton County Tourism sponsored the initiative and the Indiana Historical Society assisted with the program. Nine organizations took part in workshops and consultations over a three-year period.

## Start a STEPS Group

AASLH is happy to provide initial advice and information by phone and email as you plan your group's structure and activities. We can also simplify group enrollment and present a complimentary orientation webinar once your participants are ready to begin the STEPS program.

AASLH is working to establish additional resources for groups of five or more organizations, so be sure to check with us once you have started organizing your STEPS group.

Start a STEPS Group by contacting **Alex Collins**, Professional Development Manager at AASLH.

Email her at [collins@aslh.org](mailto:collins@aslh.org) or call (615) 320-3203.



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**"Communication within our board of directors has improved because StEPs gives us a common language to describe and achieve clear goals. Alignment with StEPs has also given us grant opportunities to improve collections management."**

-Black Heritage Society of Washington State, Seattle, WA

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## History of StEPs

Until ten years ago, the museum field offered only three assessment programs—all excellent programs—but none suited to the needs of small organizations. With so many museums in the US defined as "small," clearly a change was needed. AASLH stepped up and spent four years developing such a program with funding from an Institute of Museum and Library Services grant.

The development of StEPs was a grassroots effort—by the field, for the field. More than 135 volunteers from 37 states enthusiastically helped create the program. Forty-seven history organizations from Maine to Alaska, California to Maryland, and Mississippi to Minnesota piloted the program. Today, more than 1,000 organizations are using the StEPs program to help them better serve their communities, preserve their collections, and sustain their operations.