



2026 ANNUAL CONFERENCE

The Invisible Architecture of Staying

Insights, Data, and Frameworks from 12 Sessions

May 4-5, 2026

Williamsburg Lodge, Williamsburg, Virginia

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Inside This Report

The Simple Work We Avoid	3
How a broken towel rack frames the conference	
What Breaks When No One Is Watching	4
Ethics failures, governance gaps, and the infrastructure we assume exists	
The Structures We Assume Exist	5
Crisis preparedness, continuity, and transformation under pressure	
What 1.2 Million Records Revealed	6
Neural network data that overturns membership assumptions	
AI: Between Promise and Policy	7
Adoption, efficiency, and the 85% unpreparedness gap	
The Cost We Carry	8
Burnout, boundaries, and the engagement paradox	
Choosing to Rise	9
From weight to agency: the mountain toss and the lobster	
Frameworks That Travel	10
Five ethical tests, four delegation phases, and more	
Monday Morning: 10 Actions	11
What to do this week with what you learned	
The Strategic Opportunity	12
What the conference says about where VSAE goes next	
By the Numbers	13
The conference in data	
The Architecture of Staying	14
Closing reflection	

Based on 12 sessions across 2 days, featuring 11 speakers and 200+ attendees.
All quotes and statistics sourced from session transcripts.

OPENING KEYNOTE

The Simple Work We Avoid

"We leave instead of doing the simple work it would take to create something lasting, fulfilling and functional. Instead of doing the humble process of transforming adversaries into assets and allies, we flee."

Sean Bott, Opening Keynote

Sean Bott opened the conference with a photo of a broken towel rack he never fixed. He sold the house instead. It was a small thing, a ten-minute repair, and he chose to walk away from the whole structure rather than do the humble work of maintaining it.

The metaphor landed immediately. Associations lose members rather than make the phone call. Boards approve ambitious strategic plans rather than build the infrastructure to execute them. Staff absorb impossible workloads rather than name the problem to the people who could change it.

Bott's argument was grounded in connection science. We touch our phones 2,617 times a day. We have more ways to contact each other than at any point in human history. And yet we are lonelier, more guarded, and less able to sustain the relationships that hold organizations together.

The following pages walk through what the conference discovered about the systems we avoid building, what the data says about what happens when we finally invest in them, and the human cost of waiting.

"We need relationships now more than ever before, and we are more able to contact and less able to connect than ever before."

Sean Bott

96%

of conversations in close relationships end the way they begin

Gottman Research, cited by Bott

ETHICS + GOVERNANCE

What Breaks When No One Is Watching

\$336,000

embezzled through an undisclosed conflict of interest at Colorado Hockey Association

Holly Davis, Ethics Session

\$246,000

stolen by an unchecked treasurer at Pennsylvania OT Association

Brian Chandler, Crisis Session

"Nobody looks good in orange. Stay out of jail."

Holly Davis

Neither case was about bad people. Both were about missing infrastructure: no disclosure policy, no conflict-of-interest documentation, no dual-signature requirements on financial transactions, no whistleblower protection. When Holly Davis asked the room how many had all eight governance documents she listed, very few hands went up.

Christopher Jones delivered the same finding from a different angle: the CEO who assumed his COO already knew how to run a daily standup meeting. The COO had no system, failed visibly, and nearly lost his job. The infrastructure existed in theory but was absent in practice.

The gap between ethical aspiration and ethical infrastructure is measurable. 72% of association employees say ethics is non-negotiable. But 31% do not feel the structures at their organization would support them if an ethical issue arose. That gap is where misconduct lives.

Do You Have All Eight?

- Conflict of Interest Policy
- Whistleblower Protections
- Gift Acceptance Policy
- Ethical Complaint Procedures
- Financial Controls / Dual Signatures
- Board Member Disclosure Forms
- Crisis Communication Plan
- Code of Conduct

Few hands went up.

"Intuition is not scalable." Christopher Jones, Team Culture

CRISIS + CONTINUITY + TRANSFORMATION

The Structures We Assume Exist

58%

have no crisis management in their strategic plans

ASAE Data / Chandler

50%

are not ready to handle a crisis if one happened today

ASAE Data / Chandler

30-40%

of association revenue comes from events

ASAE Data / Chandler

Brian Chandler walked the room through an active shooter scenario at the Williamsburg Lodge where they were literally sitting. The immediacy made it visceral. Where are the exits? Who calls 911? What does your organization post in the first 30 minutes? 85% of associations discuss risk with their board, but discussion has not become planning, and planning has not become preparation.

Alison Teitelbaum's session revealed the continuity dimension of the same problem. An executive director who deleted all files on departure. A 30-year board member who held all institutional memory in his head. When he left, the organization could not explain why its own traditions existed. Four continuity areas were named as critical: role clarity, knowledge transfer, decision-making between board meetings, and leadership capacity.

Kelsey Croston closed the loop from the transformation side. Boards approve strategic plans with no operational pathway to execute them. One attendee captured it perfectly: "beer budget, champagne taste." Another described the inevitable result: "continuing to do more with less until you fall off the cliff."

The conference surfaced the same pattern three times from three directions. Crisis plans that exist as conversations but not documents. Institutional knowledge that lives in one person's head instead of a shared system. Strategic ambitions approved without the infrastructure to support them. In each case, the assumption was that the structure existed. In each case, the pressure revealed that it did not.

"Transitions don't create problems. They expose problems that were already there."

Alison Teitelbaum, Board-Executive Alignment

"Beer budget, champagne taste."

The single most-repeated phrase across table discussions

MEMBERSHIP DATA

What 1.2 Million Records Revealed

25%

increase in renewal odds with each successful renewal

Neural network analysis: 1.2 million records, 100 trillion calculations, 79 proven predictors

14%

more likely to renew with a committee position

The CEO who eliminated all committees "went white" when he saw this data.

11%

LESS likely to renew with AutoPay

Counterintuitive: convenience may replace value delivery

~100%

retention after calling at-risk members

San Diego case study: called every NPS score of 8 or below.

Higher Prices

correlate with higher renewal rates

Free membership programs frequently fail. More dues = more resources = better experience.

"Member engagement is not what people do, it's how they feel."

Amanda Kaiser, via Pete Zimek

Pete Zimek referenced Kahneman's "illusion of validity" to explain why traditional engagement scoring does not work. Activity-based scoring may be worse than useless because it reinforces biases rather than surfaces real patterns. The finding that matters: renewal is a relationship test, not an administrative transaction. The San Diego association executive who called every member with an NPS score of 8 or below saw retention go to nearly 100%. "From the phone calls." The call, not the email, not the app, produced the result.

AI + TECHNOLOGY

AI: Between Promise and Policy

THE PROMISE

90% RFP win rate using AI for every proposal

Brian Chandler, self-reported

\$50,000 grant opportunity found in five minutes via Instrumentl

Consultant-quality website audit from a single behavioral science prompt

AI adoption has **doubled** year over year across associations

ASAE data

THE REALITY

85% feel unprepared for AI

ASAE data

60% have no AI policy governing use

65% cite lack of internal experience as top barrier

Only **8-10%** of staff can use AI without creating risk

Audience discussion

"AI is supposed to create a relief with all this work that it's getting rid of, but actually you're just replacing it with other work. The busyness hasn't decreased."

Audience member, Burnout session

Brian Chandler's session was demystifying: these tools are already on your phone; use them this week. He opened with an AI-generated avatar named Shelby that polled the audience, then moved through practical applications from grant discovery to website analysis. The gap the conference revealed is not about access; it is about intentionality. 75% of associations are already using AI for marketing, but almost none have governance around its use.

Chandler also named the hallucination problem concretely: a GPT-written op-ed cited statistics that did not exist, caught only because a newspaper editor checked. The solution is not to fear AI but to govern it. His downloadable policy template via QR code gave the room a starting point. The message: "Don't get behind. Go back and create something this week."

ACTION: Write and post your AI policy this week. Chandler's template is a starting point, not a final product. Include: approved tools, prohibited data inputs, and a review cadence.

BURNOUT

The Cost We Carry

I must prove myself.

I must do more.

I don't have time for that.

Nothing's wrong.

This is more important.

The problem is others.

I need time alone.

I'm fine, stop worrying.

I just need to make it through the day.

I don't feel much anymore.

Nothing matters.

I can't go on.

Maureen Dingus, 12 Stages of Burnout *Multiple attendees confirmed they were currently at stages 3 through 7.*

"You will no longer be the most important thing in my life. That little girl is. So you can work with me while I do that, or you can't, and if you can't, tell me and I'll find somebody that will."

Dale, audience member and veteran association CEO

The room went quiet.

500+

signed up for a mental health summit organized in one month

1% to 46%

EAP usage after SafeHaven removed career consequences

"Why don't you set the boundary?" / "Fear." / "Pushback."

CLOSING KEYNOTE

Choosing to Rise

"Had I known this was gonna happen, I would have ordered the lobster."

Janine Stange's mother, on her deathbed

The "lobster" became shorthand for every deferred decision in the room.

Janine Stange asked 200+ association executives to write their "when" statements on postcards. *When I have more time. When things slow down. When I have the budget.* Then she asked them to rip those statements off and throw them in the air. The mountain toss was cathartic, the physical release of the weight that Page 8 named. The word cloud of "whens" was dominated by resource-scarcity phrases: the same systemic pressures named across every session, expressed as personal deferral.

Stange's D.R.O.P.P.P. method gave the room a structured alternative to when/then paralysis. Her mother's lobster story reframed every deferred conversation, every unwritten policy, every postponed boundary. The conference's arc completed: from "you are not alone in feeling this" (Bott) through "here is what it costs" (Dingus) to "here is what you can actually do about it" (Stange). She closed with Navy SEAL box breathing and a call to action: the lobster is now.

The D.R.O.P.P.P. Method

- D:** Decide what matters
- R:** Release what doesn't serve you
- O:** Organize your priorities
- P:** Pursue with intention
- P:** Persist through resistance
- P:** Perform with purpose

"Momentum ignites when we let go of our need for perfect conditions."

Janine Stange

"Within you is the ability to do the extraordinary, something uncommon with your life. You don't have these gifts and these talents for yourself. You have them because the world needs them."

Mr. Valentine, via Janine Stange

FRAMEWORKS

Frameworks That Travel

Tools you can use Monday morning, sourced from six sessions

Five Ethical Tests

Holly Davis

1. Is it legal?
2. Is it fair?
3. Would you want it on the front page?
4. How would you feel explaining it to your members?
5. What does your gut say?

Four-Phase Delegation

Christopher Jones

- Phase 1:** Direct instruction
 - Phase 2:** Observe and provide feedback
 - Phase 3:** Act and report
 - Phase 4:** Complete handoff
- Start at Phase 1 even with senior hires.*

Four Continuity Areas

Alison Teitelbaum

- 1. Role clarity:** Who can sign a contract during a leadership gap?
- 2. Knowledge transfer:** Context behind decisions, not just decisions
- 3. Decision-movement:** How to act between board meetings
- 4. Leadership capacity:** Distributing responsibility broadly

The Gratitude Formula

Sean Bott

- Hunt the good.** Look for specific positive impact.
 - Share the good.** Name it directly to the person.
 - Let the good change you.** Commit to paying it forward.
- Not "thanks for helping" but naming the specific impact.*

Color-Coded Standups

Kelsey Croston

Daily or weekly 15-minute standups.
Red: at risk **Yellow:** caution **Green:** on track
 Use for 3 to 5 key metrics.
OKRs over KPIs for transforming associations.

The Connection Formula

Sean Bott

- Compliment** to interrupt threat assessment.
 - Use their name** as a treasure (pause around the name).
 - Triple nod** for 200-300% more words.
 - Genuine smile.** Start warm.
- 96% of conversations end how they begin.*

TAKEAWAYS

Monday Morning

10 Actions for Association Leaders

- 1 Call at-risk members before invoices go out.**
 Pull NPS scores of 8 or below. Make the call while it is still a service call, not a collections call. One San Diego association saw retention go to nearly 100%.
[Zimek](#)
- 2 Write and post your AI policy this week.**
 Approved tools, prohibited data inputs, review cadence. Adapt from Chandler's template. 60% of associations have no AI governance at all.
[Chandler](#)
- 3 Lead your team through the five ethical tests.**
 Use one real scenario at your next retreat or staff meeting. Legal, fair, front page, member comfort, gut check. Not training; a working practice.
[Davis](#)
- 4 Start daily or weekly standups.**
 15 minutes. Color-coded status: red, yellow, green on 3 to 5 key metrics. The goal is visibility, not perfection. Start this week.
[Croston](#)
- 5 Use Phase 1 delegation for every new task.**
 Even with senior hires. Direct instruction first, then observe, then handoff. The CEO who assumed his COO already knew nearly lost him.
[Jones](#)
- 6 Document decision context, not just decisions.**
 200-word memo: the problem, the options, the assumptions. File it where your successor will find it. Update as assumptions change.
[Teitelbaum](#)
- 7 Ask volunteers what they want from the experience.**
 Three to five interviews this month. Report findings to your board. Implement one change within 30 days. Volunteer retention predicts member retention.
[Michelle Runge / Kelly Ann Gull](#)
- 8 Schedule 10 minutes daily of something you enjoy.**
 Not optional. Block it. Protect it. Model it for your team. A medical study showed this drastically reduced burnout rates among physicians.
[Dingus](#)
- 9 Run a behavioral science AI audit on your website.**
 Color contrast, competing CTAs, member value proposition in 10 words. Chandler demonstrated this live, producing consultant-quality results instantly.
[Chandler](#)
- 10 Get a crisis plan into your strategic plan.**
 One-page summary: crisis team, holding statement template, 30-minute decision tree. Board approves by consent agenda. This is governance infrastructure.
[Chandler](#)

These takeaways are sourced from speaker presentations and audience discussions at VSAE 2026. Each is designed to be executed this week or this month.

LOOKING AHEAD

The Strategic Opportunity

The conference surfaced a single strategic insight: VSAE's opportunity is to become the governance partner that Virginia's association executives turn to when facing structural decisions they cannot make alone. This is a distinct positioning from "the state association that holds the annual conference." Every opportunity below was generated by conference content, not projected from outside.

ACT NOW (Q3 2026)

AI Policy Template Library

60% have no AI governance. Chandler's QR code template was the session's most tangible takeaway. Institutionalize and maintain it.

Mental Health Standing Track

500+ signups proved the demand. Make burnout and wellness a permanent conference track with peer support between events.

Membership Health Checklist

Translate Zimek's 79 predictors into a self-assessment any association can run against their own AMS data.

BUILD NEXT (Q4 2026 - Q1 2027)

Governance Resilience Program

Ethics training + crisis simulation as one product. Davis's five tests + Chandler's scenarios in a facilitated workshop.

Northern Virginia Programming

Regional half-day events anchored on conference content for associations near the technology corridors and federal agencies.

Burnout Peer Support Cohort

Monthly CEO check-ins between conferences. CEOs have no natural peer group inside their own organizations.

INVEST LONG (2027+)

SafeHaven Legislative Advocacy

EAP usage went from 1% to 46% when career consequences were removed. Document the model for other regulated professions.

Predictive Analytics Partnership

Negotiate preferred access to Novi AMS renewal prediction tools for member associations at scale.

The Burnout Problem and the Governance Problem Are the Same Problem

Associations are asking the same small group of people to absorb the gap between board ambition and organizational capacity. The governance documents are missing because the person who should have written them is doing three other jobs.

The Engagement Paradox: *The activities that retain members deplete the staff who deliver them.*

This paradox was visible across five sessions. It remains unresolved.

CONFERENCE DATA

By the Numbers

25%

renewal odds increase per successful renewal
Zimek / Neural Network

85%

feel unprepared for AI
ASAE / Chandler

58%

have no crisis plan in strategic plan
ASAE / Chandler

14%

renewal boost from committee membership
Zimek / Neural Network

72% / 31%

say ethics is non-negotiable / say structures would not support them
ASAE / Davis

500+

signed up for a mental health summit in one month
Dingus / VSCPA

11%

LESS renewal with AutoPay
Zimek / Neural Network

\$336K

embezzled through undisclosed conflict
Davis / Colorado Hockey

90%

RFP win rate using AI
Chandler, self-reported

40% / 40%

adopted AI / have policies
ASAE / Chandler

~100%

retention after calling at-risk members
Zimek / San Diego case

10 min

daily enjoyment to reduce burnout
Dingus / Medical study

All statistics sourced from speaker presentations and ASAE research cited at the 2026 VSAE Annual Conference. Self-reported and anecdotal data points are noted.

CLOSING

The Architecture of Staying

Across two days and 12 sessions, the VSAE 2026 Annual Conference documented a single pattern: the systems that hold associations together are invisible until they break. Governance, culture, volunteer pipelines, member relationships, staff wellness. These are the towel racks nobody fixes. The conference gave Virginia's association leaders the data to see what is broken, the frameworks to build what is missing, and the honest company of peers who are carrying the same weight. The architecture of staying is built by people who choose to do the humble, unsexy, daily work of connection, documentation, delegation, disclosure, and self-care.

"We leave instead of doing the simple work it would take to create something lasting, fulfilling and functional."

Sean Bott, Opening Keynote

What is the invisible work your association has been avoiding?

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