



The Association of American Literary Agents 2023 Membership Survey Report

The Association of American Literary Agents (AALA) conducted a bi-annual membership survey in 2023 with three primary aims: 1) to collect demographics and other information about agents and their agencies to benchmark against past and future surveys, 2) to assess how members perceive AALA and their preferences about programs and benefits, and 3) to understand the perspectives and state of mind of agents regarding industry issues.

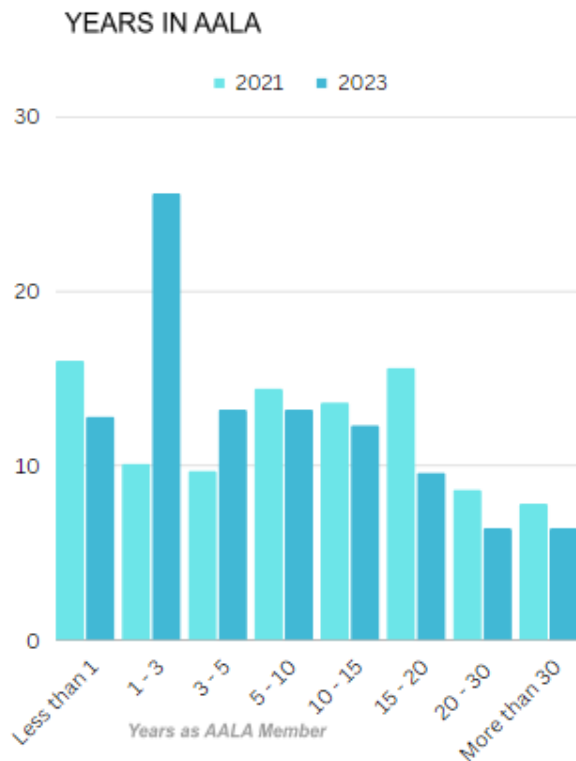
Conducted online between May 1 and August 1, 2023, the survey drew a total of 221 respondents. This number represents 48.7% of the total AALA membership.

Two years ago, AALA's first membership survey sought to establish baseline demographics and provide concrete data. Since then, and in part as a result of the findings of the last survey, AALA launched a number of initiatives including new membership categories and revisions to the Canon of Ethics intended to make membership more accessible to a broader range of agents.

In 2023, the focus of the survey turns to deeper questions about membership needs and what role AALA might play in addressing them in the future. The following report provides key findings from the survey.

I. Demographic Changes

Newer to AALA and Profession. Respondents today are not only new to AALA but also agenting. The number of respondents who had joined AALA within three years prior to the survey period was 26.1% in 2021, rising to 38.4% in 2023.



Furthermore, a mere 5.4% of respondents in 2021 were new to agenting, defined as having less than 3-4 years of experience; this group jumps to 22.4% in 2023. Last year AALA introduced tiered dues tied to years of experience and a special educational rate for those with less than two years of experience. These initiatives made membership more affordable for newer agents and likely factored into the double-digit increase.

More Diverse But Overwhelmingly White. In 2023, as in 2021, the vast majority of respondents identify as white, cis female, straight, and without disabilities or chronic conditions. However, thanks in part to changes in AALA membership categories and the work of Literary Agents of Change (LAOC) to support agents of color, respondents today are more diverse than they were two years ago.

Nevertheless, AALA membership – along with the profession as a whole – remain predominantly cis and white. More than eight of ten respondents (83.1%) say they are white/Caucasian, a notable decrease from 2021 when they made up almost nine of ten respondents. The four highest BIPOC groups in 2023 are Latinx/Latino/Mexican (6.4%), Asian/Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander/South Asian/Southeast Asian (5%), Biracial/Multiracial (4.6%) and Black/Afro American/Afro Caribbean (4.1%).

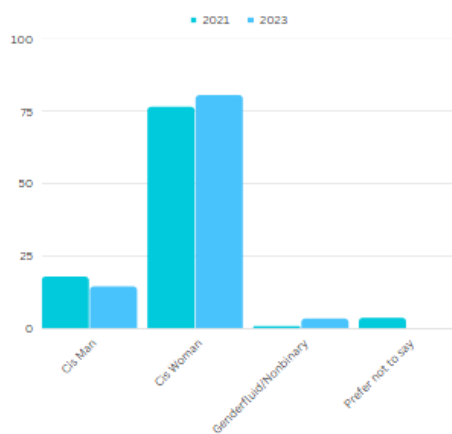
The percentages of all BIPOC groups increased since 2021, though at a modest rate. Overall, BIPOC representation still is low, adding to the perception of the organization – and industry – as predominantly white.

RESPONSES BY RACE	2021	2023
White/Caucasian	88%	83.1%
Asian/Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander/South Asian/Southeast Asian	1.5%	5%
Latinx/Latino/Mexican	4.7%	6.4%

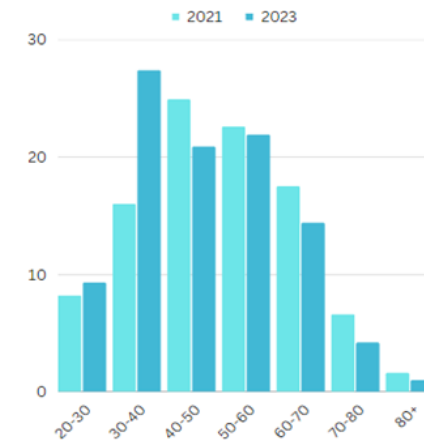
Black/Afro American/Afro Caribbean	3.5%	4.1%
Biracial/Multiracial	3.9%	4.6%
American Indian/Alaska Native/First Nations/Native American	0%	0.5%
Middle Eastern	1.6%	2.3%
Prefer not to say	1.6%	0%
Other	0%	3%

Younger, Female and Cis. In 2023, the pool of respondents is younger than it was in 2021, which correlates with the uptick in younger and newer agents joining, as reported above. Respondents between 30-40 years old constitute the single largest age group in 2023 whereas the single largest age category in 2021 was between 40-50 years old.

ALA Membership, indeed the profession as a whole, is predominantly female, with 82.1% of respondents identifying as cis women, 14% as cis men and 2.8% as genderfluid/nonbinary. In two years time, the percentage that identify as genderfluid or nonbinary more than doubles to 7% for those under the age of 40.



GENDER IDENTITY



AGE

Increase in Those Who Identify as Having a Disability. The most notable demographic change between the 2021 and 2023 surveys can be seen in the increase of respondents who identify as a person with disabilities or chronic conditions. In 2021, 8.2% of respondents identified as such, whereas in 2023 the percentage jumps to 20.8%.

Tri-State Concentration and Representation in 30 States. As expected given the concentration of publishers in New York City, more than half of respondents (52.3%) come from the tri-state area. Other respondents are scattered across 30 different states as well as the District of Columbia. The three most popular states of residence are New York (40.5%), California (15.4%) and New Jersey (8.7%).

The location of agencies parallel the location of agents, with 47.9% of agencies located in New York, 17.1% in California and 7.6% in New Jersey.

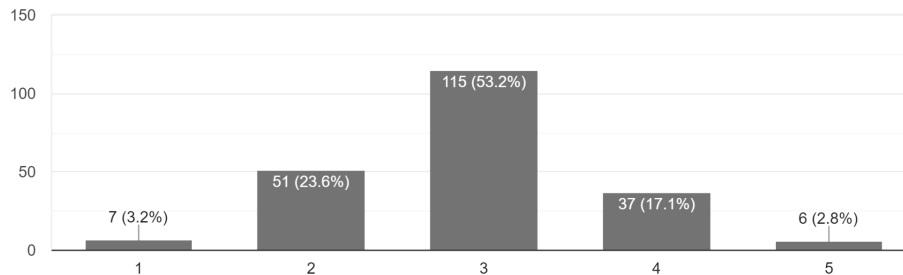
When it comes to remote work, literary agencies are ahead of the curve. Many agencies (37.7%) have always offered a mix of remote and in person positions, compared to 30% of U.S. employers, according to the research firm Gartner. Since the pandemic, that number of agencies with some remote work rose to nearly 60%, compared to 48% of U.S. employers. Almost a quarter (24.5%) of agencies have always offered remote positions only.

II. Anxiety over the State of the Industry

The survey comes at a time of industry uncertainty and unrest. The consolidation of publishers is cited as a concern for 72.2% of respondents, a point brought home during the survey period when Penguin Random House laid off 100 plus employees. HarperCollins also announced layoffs during this time after a high profile strike in late 2022 to early 2023. Given the controversy and turmoil when Paramount announced S&S was up for sale in 2020, the news of private equity firm KKR as the buyer broke during the survey period, further cementing unease among agents.

Against this backdrop, it comes as no surprise when asked how positively they feel about the current state of the publishing industry on a scale of 1-5 (with 5 being the most positive), respondents give a lackluster ranking of 2.8. Because this question did not appear in the 2021

On a scale of 1-5, how positively do you feel about the current state of the publishing industry?
216 responses



survey, there is no data to suggest whether agents feel more or less positive now than they did then; nevertheless, qualitative responses in 2023 back up deep concern and anxiety among agents about the industry. As one agent notes, there are “seemingly endless issues we are facing in publishing today, which I feel I have little to no control over.”

III. Widespread Burnout

Burnout sits at the top of agent worries, a concern cited by three out of four respondents and more than eight of ten respondents who are 30-40 years old. Agents report working long hours; more than 40 hours per week is the norm: 37.4% work 40-60 hours, 15.2% work 50-60 hours, and 9.6% work more than 60 hours per week. Furthermore, half of respondents say they often or always work over the weekend. One respondent puts it succinctly, “I do not have a healthy work/life balance.” A quarter of all respondents report that their current level of burnout actively interferes with their ability to enjoy their jobs; this number rises to 35% in the 30-40 age group and 12% worry they will not be able to remain in publishing due to their current level of burnout.

Client responsibilities weigh heavily on agents. 38.6% of respondents say they represent 30 or more authors, with 16.2% representing more than 50 authors. On the question of agents and their editorial work with authors, 92.9% of respondents say they offer editorial feedback to their clients as a part of their author-agent relationship, with only 2.8% saying they do not focus on editorial feedback with their clients.

In addition to their usual client load, 22% of respondents report receiving over 100 new queries per week. Only 20.1% of respondents have an assistant who is dedicated to them and their work. A sizable number of respondents (43%) indicate that in addition to their responsibilities as agents, they are also responsible for subrights, contracts, accounting, and/or office management. Despite being overwhelmed, agents say they “have to keep it together for their clients” but “it can be exhausting to be responsive and positive on a constant basis.” The expectation for them to respond promptly to colleague and client requests is cited by 44.8% of respondents who described themselves as feeling burnout as a contributing factor. Agents wished clients knew how “little power (they have) over what sells.” Despite their best efforts, “the market has shrunk so drastically that it’s hard to place even stellar projects.” As one agent laments, “We don’t have magic wands.”

If agents are experiencing burnout, so are editors at publishing houses. Respondents report longer-than-normal wait times on submissions, if they get any reply at all. “Ghosting is awful,” says one agent. If given the choice, respondents resoundingly say any response is better than none. “I would 100x rather get a two-word rejection on a project—no thanks—than never hear

from you about it.” Timely responses from editors are more than common courtesy; they’re critical. “We can’t make a living if they don’t answer their email.”

IV. Low Salaries and Questions about the Pay Model

For many agents, the profession’s business model doesn’t add up. Half of all respondents agree that improving the business model is important for the publishing industry to address, and qualitative and quantitative responses throughout the survey underscore similar concerns. Respondents point to the “invisible” labor that agents do and for which they often are not compensated. “We do a lot of work that is essentially unpaid, often for years,” says one respondent, echoing the sentiments of many others. The pay structure is cited as the main contributor to the burnout felt by younger agents, leaving some respondents to wonder if agenting offers a viable professional path.

An “early career agent” asks, “How long it usually takes new agents to make their first handful of sales, and how long it takes to have a more stable income, especially post 2020.” Another describes “feelings of burnout ebb and flow tied to compensation.” More than half of respondents (55.2%) indicate that a main factor to burnout comes from the reality that their “job requires high effort and output with low financial reward.” An overwhelming 68.9% of all respondents point to low salaries as a critical issue for the industry to address; nine out of ten respondents between 30-40 years old agree.

This sentiment is no surprise when considering that 59.3% of respondents now earn less than \$100,000 for their personal annual income, compared to 45.6% in 2021 – which makes sense given the influx of newer agents.

INCOME	2021	2023
Less than \$25,000	7%	10%
\$25-\$50,000	15.6%	18.2%
\$50,000-\$100,00	23%	31.1%
\$100,000-\$150,000	10.2%	13.9%
\$150,000-\$200,000	8.2%	5.3%

\$200,000-\$250,000	5.5%	5.7%
\$250,000+	11.7%	13.4%

In the 2023 survey, 46.2% of respondents cite concerns about being able to pay for cost of living expenses as contributing to burnout. More than half (51%) of respondents between 30-40 years old cite this concern. (The MIT Living Wage Calculator estimates a living wage for a single adult with no children in the New York City/Metropolitan area to be \$22.51/hour or \$40,968.20/year. Minimum wage is estimated at \$14.20/hour or \$25,844/year.)

Like in other professions, there is a gender divide in income: 59% of respondents identifying as cis men reported personal annual income of over \$100,000, compared to only 36% of respondents identifying as cis women. Fully one third of respondents identifying as cis women make under \$50,000.

The commission structure is important to take into consideration since 63.9 % of respondents are paid all or in part on commission. One-third of respondents get a salary of some kind (which may be combined with commission) and 25% also receive payout as an owner, partner or shareholder of an agency.

Only 9% of respondents are paid on salary only. Due to the inherent fluctuation of earnings based on commission, draw, and agency owner/shareholder payouts, this means that fewer than one in ten respondents can predict their exact income in any given year. This creates particular challenges for agents who are newer to the industry and for agents who represent authors less likely to guarantee significant and dependable revenue streams. The impetus for AALA to revise the Canon of Ethics to provide for agents being paid for editorial services served to enable agents to supplement their income if needed.

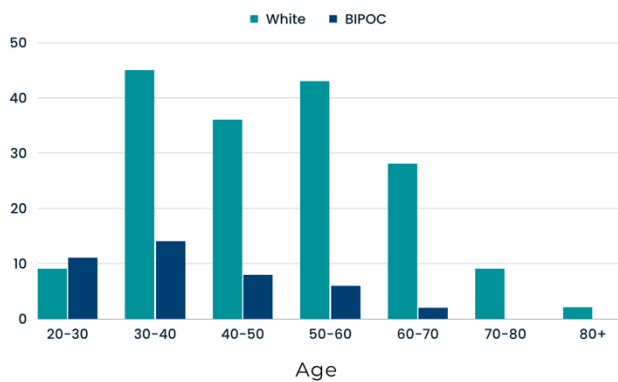
The survey provides glimpses of tension between younger agents and established counterparts and between agents and agency owners. A quarter of respondents are agency owners, reporting they are paid an owner/partner/shareholder distribution if and when the business makes a profit, in addition to their payments from their salary, draw, and/or commission structures. Among those who work for an agency, sources of conflict may revolve around separation terms. “What happens to an agent's commissions and unsold rights when they leave the agency” is cited by one respondent as a point of contention. Says another: “There are some agents who are stuck at a toxic agency because they don’t want to have to start over from scratch.” For some agents, working for themselves is the answer and say they are looking for programs from AALA for new agency founders who left previous agencies to launch their own businesses.

V. Inequity in the Agenting Community

A note on terminology: in using the term “white” throughout this section, we refer specifically to respondents who indicated an exclusively white identity. “BIPOC” refers to respondents who identified as Asian/Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander/South Asian/ South East Asian, Latinx/Latino/Mexican, Black/Afro American/Afro Caribbean, Biracial/Multiracial, American Indian/Alaska Native/First Nations/Native American, and/or Middle Eastern, and includes respondents who selected white/Caucasian as well as another identity.

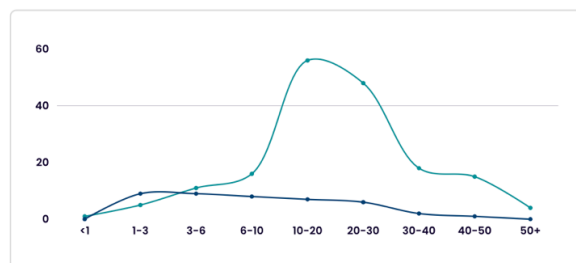
We recognize that not everyone under the “BIPOC” label, as we use it here, may identify or present as BIPOC, and we acknowledge that the survey did not explicitly ask individuals to share whether they identify as part of the BIPOC community. But it is important to highlight the racial inequities revealed by this data, and this report does so within these limitations.

In analyzing the data, it’s important to highlight disparities between white and BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) respondents. Diversity, equity, and inclusion issues are top of mind for many agents, with 58% of respondents citing DEI efforts and representation as critical for the industry to address. The overall survey results suggest there is still a long way to go.



Within these groups, there are clear disparities in terms of age and longevity within the industry: the majority of BIPOC respondents (59%) are under 40 years old, whereas the majority of white respondents (67%) are above the age of 40. Most white respondents have between 10 and 30 years of experience in the industry, while most BIPOC respondents have between 1 and 6 years of experience. This suggests that many BIPOC respondents are

White respondents made up 80.6% of overall survey respondents, and BIPOC respondents made up 19.4%. This is consistent with data from [Lee and Low’s Diversity Baseline Survey from four years ago \(2019\)](#), which indicate that the overall makeup of the agenting community is 80% white.



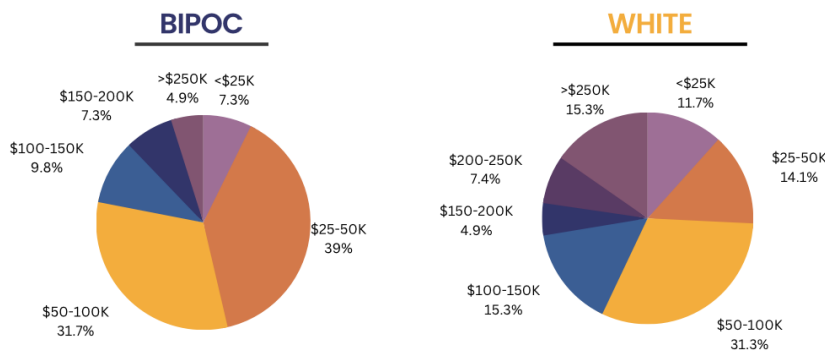
Years Employed in Publishing

● BIPOC ● White

younger and newer to the industry. It also suggests that long-term retention of BIPOC talent will be a significant challenge.

There are clear income discrepancies between white and BIPOC respondents. Only 22% of BIPOC respondents earn over six-figures, compared with 42.9% of white respondents. The largest percentage of white respondents fall in the personal income bracket between \$50K - \$100K per year, while the largest percentage of BIPOC respondents fall in the income bracket between \$25K - \$50K per year.

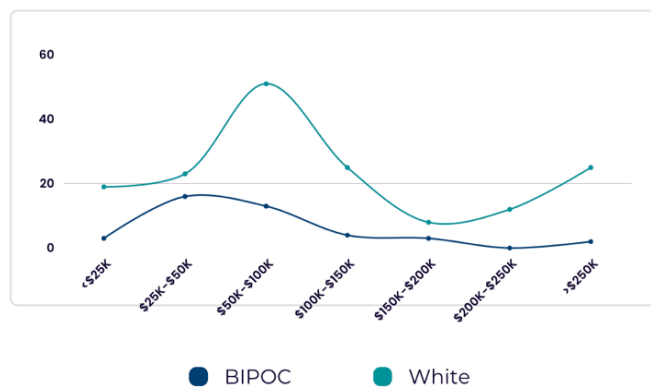
Personal Annual Income



A possible explanation is differing levels of experience within the industry. If it’s assumed that income levels rise with experience/seniority, given that most BIPOC respondents are newer to the industry, the lower income bracket might be understood as a reflection of those respondents having fewer years of experience.

However, it’s also important to acknowledge that for most agents, their income depends on the income of the authors they represent. As cited earlier in this report, 63.9% of agents indicate that at least some of their income is derived from commission, directly tying their personal income to the income of their authors. As [#PublishingPaidMe, a hashtag started by fantasy author L.L. McKinney, revealed in 2020](#), BIPOC authors often earn less than their white

Personal Annual Income



counterparts — so for BIPOC agents who may be more likely to represent BIPOC authors, this presents another possible reason for the income disparities between white and BIPOC respondents.

The role that editors and publishers play in determining which books get acquired and for how much should be noted. As one respondent puts it: “[W]hether or not [editors] read a submission, they still get paid their salary. Our livelihood, particularly early career agents of color, depend on editors actually reading their submissions. They hold a lot of power over us, but do not seem to acknowledge this.”

The survey also reveals differences in how white and BIPOC respondents are experiencing burnout. Of all white respondents, 23% report experiencing no burnout, compared to just 5% of all BIPOC respondents — and only 9% of white respondents indicate that they worry they will not be able to remain in publishing due to their current level of burnout compared with 21% of all BIPOC respondents. This suggests that BIPOC respondents are experiencing burnout more acutely and in greater numbers.

Low pay and high burnout present two key explanations for the challenge of retaining BIPOC talent within the agenting community. Of those who said they are experiencing burnout, two out of three (67.6%) of BIPOC respondents cite concerns about being able to pay for cost-of-living expenses as a source of burnout, compared to 40.5% of white respondents. And, 81% of BIPOC respondents say that low salaries are among the most important issues for the publishing industry to address, compared to 63% of white respondents.

The persistence of unpaid internships and the absence of formal mentorship programs also presents barriers to access and retention. A [2022 PEN America report](#) on race and equity in the book publishing industry cites “the importance of person-to-person connections and mentors in publishing. Yet, the lack of such relationships is among the major obstacles cited by [people of color] that narrow and obstruct the paths to publishing success.” While 60% of respondents in senior positions at their agencies indicate that it’s important to them to offer mentorship to their colleagues, only 21.5% of respondents indicate that their agencies offer formal mentorship programs. And more than half (58.4%) of respondents indicate their agencies do not offer paid internships.

Respondents say they support DEI initiatives via Literary Agents of Change, an independent 501(c) (3) charitable organization that grew from the AALA DEI Committee, dedicated to advancing a diverse workforce in the publishing industry. When asked about their involvement, 42.5% of respondents report having donated to Literary Agents of Change, and 17% have participated as mentors in the Literary Agents of Change mentorship program.

VI. Views on AALA



Since the last membership survey in 2021, AALA has launched a variety of initiatives, and members have noticed. “The growth and support coming from rebrand has been awesome,” says one agent. Another “applauds the changes, the level of engagement and the desire to make this a real and welcoming community of agents.” Not everyone sees growth as 100% positive, however. One respondent wonders if “becoming too big and far-flung may make AALA less of a personal community.”

Indeed, personal interactions is a key aspect of membership for nearly a third of respondents who are active in the organization, belonging to one or more committees. For them, the most valuable aspect of membership is networking through small group involvement; however, not everyone feels the same opportunity to take advantage of this valuable aspect. More than one member indicated they had tried to join committees in the past but were not accepted. Furthermore, nearly 40% of respondents don’t participate on committees because they lack the time or desire.

One thing agents agree on: Nine out of ten respondents say it is important for AALA to advocate for agents. Almost an equal number say AALA should represent its membership on pressing membership questions and issues. Most recall and participated in AALA polls about Penguin Random House’s bid to purchase S&S and the HarperCollins Strike. Similarly, 85.1% say they want AALA to continue collaborating with organizations such as the Authors Guild and the American Library Association. Yet, some feel AALA could go further beyond “notices and

alerts" to “assert itself on issues that everyone is talking/cares about” and “look outward as much as inward, at non-members as much as members.”

Respondents overall give AALA high marks with 64.2% of respondents saying they are very likely to recommend AALA membership to one of their colleagues.

VII. Looking Ahead

AALA’s 2023 membership survey portrays an industry in flux, with broad concerns about consolidations and layoffs at the major publishers, coupled with agents experiencing burnout and anxiety over income. Agents are questioning whether the commission structure is a viable compensation model, especially for newer agents. And, for all the attention to DEI issues, the survey underscores inequities between white and BIPOC agents with regard to income levels and other important measures in an industry that remains predominantly white.

Nevertheless, survey results point to a number of bright spots and opportunities. Members give AALA positive marks overall and say they find value not only from their affiliation but also the role that AALA plays in ensuring its members adhere to the highest standards. In addition, respondents in 2023 compared to just two years ago are newer, younger and more diverse, as a result of recent initiatives, such as changes to the membership structure and mentorship and fellowship program. While bringing new perspectives, these cohorts also may demand different things, meaning AALA cannot assume current programs and services will keep them in the long term.

Comparing the landscape between the previous survey in 2021 and today drives home the importance of AALA keeping apprised of the needs of members and potential members and remaining nimble in an industry that stands at a crossroads of change.