Connectivity for PC/PB Members during the COVID-19 Emergency: Tips for PCS Staff

INTRODUCTION

As of early May 2020, the vast majority of Ryan White HIV/AIDS Program (RWHAP) Part A recipients and planning council/planning body (PC/PB) support (PCS) staff are working remotely. While states of emergency are in effect, most states that normally require face-to-face meetings have suspended some open meeting law requirements so that public bodies like PC/PBs are permitted to meet "electronically," with appropriate notice and provision for public access to the meetings. Specific requirements vary. As states resume economic activity, gatherings of more than 10 people may still be banned or discouraged for weeks or months, or permitted only if 6-foot social distancing is possible.

Some PC/PBs are meeting electronically. This allows for ongoing planning, but involves adaptations and challenges. One of the most basic challenges is differences in connectivity among PC/PB members. Connectivity is "the ability to connect to remote meetings through the internet." Connectivity requires access to devices and networks as well as internet and cellphone plans. Connecting PC/PB members for remote meetings also requires a communications platform for video conferencing, and the shared knowledge, skills, and willingness needed to use it. Ideally, all PC/PB members should be able to use audio and video conferencing, receive and review needed materials, and participate fully and comfortably in remote meetings. The reality is more challenging.

A basic issue is members' varied access to devices and the internet. Typically, some PC/PB members have a desktop or laptop computer or tablet with a high-speed and reliable internet connection, a built-in or external video camera, and a monthly plan with unlimited data. Others access the internet largely or entirely through a smartphone (a cellphone with advanced features including an internet connection and the ability to use apps) and a monthly plan that covers lots of minutes, texting, and a high level of data use. At least a few members probably have only a basic cellphone with a monthly plan that allows a limited number of minutes for calls, some texting, and little or no internet access due to data use limits. Some may have no telephone at least part of the time.

If some members lack connectivity, important voices and perspectives are missing from discussions and decision making – most often those of consumers and underserved subpopulations. In addition, some PC/PBs have quorum requirements that specify not only the percent of all members but also the percent or number of consumer members who must attend a meeting, so lack of connectivity can prevent them from reaching quorum.

TIPS FOR ADDRESSING MEMBER CONNECTIVITY CHALLENGES

1. **First, learn about your members' connectivity – devices, networks, and plans.** Find out which members are connected via internet, use smartphones rather than computers, or have only cellphones (and perhaps limited minutes per month). Do their computers or tablets have video and audio capacity? Find out about internet speed and reliability; can they join a video conference and use both video and audio without delays or frozen video? Identify any members that have

phones but no internet access, including members who use cellphones provided by a service provider or use prepaid phones.

Help members concerned about their internet quality or speed take easy online tests to find out if their connectivity allows them to participate fully in video meetings. [1]

2. **Ensure that PC/PB and committee chairs have adequate technology to run a meeting.** Ensuring their audio and video connectivity should be your first priority. A PC/PB rarely has the resources to provide devices or pay for internet connections for many members, but it may be possible to ensure internet access to leaders who are expected to chair remote meetings. Sometimes people may have good internet but share a family computer. If your PC/PB has tablets or laptops purchased for needs assessments or meetings that are unused during the COVID-19 emergency, perhaps they can be loaned to officers. If these officers are low-income, they may have access to free or low-cost cellphone and/or internet access (see below).

3. **Find ways to get all your members connected, at least using audio.** For example, explore and help eligible members, especially consumers, obtain one of the following:

    • **Short-term freebies or low-cost plans.** Many internet service providers announced free or low-cost service to low-income individuals and households with students, and/or provided two months of unlimited data for all their customers at the start of the pandemic shutdowns. As of the end of April, some were still offering 60 days of free internet. [2]

    • **Ongoing low-cost internet plans.** Many well-known providers offer low-cost internet access and in-home WiFi, sometimes with speeds of 15-30 Mbps and no data cap. Some also offer low-cost computers with programs like Microsoft Office. Eligibility varies, but may include students, seniors, and/or low-income individuals and families. [3]

    • **Free cellphones or smartphones:** Some PC/PB members, especially consumers, may already have free cellphones, and others may be eligible for them through the government-sponsored LifeLine Assistance program. It provides "financially disadvantaged" people with a cellphone with "anywhere from 250 to an unlimited number of minutes and texts every month – at no charge." [4] Members who qualify must apply directly to the provider – but PCS staff can help them find the plans with the most minutes, texts, and, in some cases, data as well.

4. **Use an electronic meeting platform that is smartphone-friendly and allows participants to call in toll-free from a cellphone or landline.** Where PCS personnel are public employees, the PC/PB may be required to use the city or county platform. However, if your PC/PB must provide its own system, agree on specific criteria for choosing the right platform – for example, large enough maximum number of participants; access via a variety of devices and operating systems; no requirement that participants have an account; recording available; screen sharing available; built-in provision for interpretation. Some PC/PBs have transferred unused funds for meeting costs like transportation and food to pay monthly costs for a system that meets their needs. This makes good sense for PC/PBs in states with open meeting laws that permit remote meetings even when there is no emergency, and for bodies that will continue to meet electronically for other types of HIV planning (such as Fast Track Cities and Ending the HIV Epidemic) or for work with the state or other PC/PBs. The intent should be a system that maximizes access, even for members with limited connectivity.

5. **Provide essential materials to all members.** You may need to provide most materials electronically while staff are working at home, but be aware that some members with computers may not

have printers and may be reading the materials on small screens, like tablets, small laptops, or smartphones. Limit the number and length of documents where possible. Avoid sending PDFs, which are difficult to read on a smartphone. Members who connect by phone without video and cannot see a shared screen will need hard-copy materials. Some PCS staff are allowed to come to the office during the emergency, with social distancing, and are making and mailing copies of materials to members who need them. If documents are brief and only a few members need hard copies, it may be practical to arrange for printing and mailing them from home.

6. **Help members learn to use the technology.** It is not enough to be able to connect; they need to know how to connect and be comfortable with remote meetings. Members may need help in downloading an app on a smartphone or saving a program on their computer or tablet, learning how to connect and check audio and video, or using chatroom or other functions. Even those with needed equipment are likely to need help connecting the first time. Here are some suggestions from PCS staff:

   • Train all PCS staff (and recipient staff where they are willing to assist), so they can train others.

   • Train the PC/PB and committee chairs or co-chairs first.

   • Expect to spend some time on training during your first few meetings.

   • Be prepared to guide individual members by telephone through the process of downloading and using a smartphone app or computer program.

   • Develop and share written instructions for connecting to and participating in a remote meeting.

7. **Take advantage of additional connectivity options as states start opening up but still ban large gatherings.** For example, some public parks offer free WiFi.[5] So do libraries. Use of WiFi for smartphone connection to PC/PB meetings lets members with limited minutes or data access save them for other purposes.

8. **Regularly assess – and be sure no members get lost in the process.** Most PC/PBs are likely to have a small number of members with very limited connectivity who will become discouraged and disengaged unless they receive regular contact and support. Making time to help them get and stay connected will make the difference between ongoing participation and the loss of a needed member.

REFERENCES

1   Needed internet speed depends on many factors including other users and other processes on your laptop or other device, but group video calls typically require an outbound speed of 3.2 Mbps (megabytes per second) and an inbound (download) speed of 4.00 Mbps if there are 10 or more participants and you want other people to see you and perhaps do screen sharing. See Stan Horaczek, "Here's how much internet bandwidth you actually need to work from home," March 12, 2020, at https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/technology/here-s-how-much-internet-bandwidth-you-actually-need-to-work-from-home/ar-BB1163Qz. Another measure of connectivity is PING speed, which measures the time it takes for your computer to respond to a request by another server; around 50 milliseconds (ms) is good; above 150 ms can cause a noticeable lag. See Quora, "What is a good ping speed," at https://www.quora.com/What-is-a-good-ping-speed. For easy Internet speed testing options, see "The 7 Best Internet Speed Test Sites," at https://www.broadbandsearch.net/blog/best-internet-speed-test-sites.

2   See the Communications section of Entrepreneur Media's "198 Tools to Help You Through the Coronavirus Pandemic," by Adam Soccolich, at https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/347840

3   See Rebecca Lee Armstrong, "Are There Programs Available to Help Make Internet Service More Affordable?" April 20, 2020, at https://www.highspeedinternet.com/resources/are-there-government-programs-to-help-me-get-internet-service#xfinity.

4   Some additional providers, including major national providers, offer monthly discounts averaging $10 off regular plans. Cellphones provided are often refurbished and may or may not be smartphones. DC, Puerto Rico, and every state except Montana participate. Eligibility requirements vary slightly by state. Generally, individuals qualify if they participate in a federal benefit program such as Medicaid, SSI, SNAP, Section 8 housing assistance, or some tribal programs. They can also qualify based on income, with the upper limit typically about 135% of the federal poverty level (FPL). The program is particularly generous in California, where participants typically receive more voice minutes and texts and more often get smartphones and data plans, since California provides companies an additional state subsidy. The website provides links to all states and providers. See https://www.freegovernmentcellphones.net/.

5   See http://www.openwifispots.com/guide_free_wifi_wireless_hotspot-parks.aspx.