Remote Meetings: Tips for PC/PBs

Here are some tips for preparing for and implementing remote PC/PB meetings. The focus is on the roles for PC/PB support (PCS) staff and leaders in full PC/PB meetings, but most of the tips apply to committee meetings as well. PCS staff will generally take the lead in preparations and follow up; the Chair or Co-Chairs will run the actual meeting with technology support from staff.

PREPARING FOR REMOTE MEETINGS

- **Be aware of the open meeting laws and policies currently in effect in your jurisdiction.** Specific requirements vary. Be sure that PC/PB leadership and PCS staff understand which requirements are and not suspended. Ensure you are meeting requirements around public notice, public access, public comment, and voting.[1] For example, some states require roll call voting during remote meetings even when it is not required at face-to-face meetings.
- **Prepare for using the technology.** Be aware of the features and limitations of your platform; for example, free or low-cost versions of some platforms limit the number of participants and the length of meetings, and lack some helpful features. Once you have the platform in place:
  - Be sure several people can manage the platform; take advantage of free tutorials and articles.
  - Train anyone who may be chairing a PC/PB, committee or caucus meeting on how to manage a meeting remotely using this platform. Give particular attention to the Chair or Co-Chairs of the PC/PB and leaders of your largest committees.
  - Schedule a pre-meeting practice session before each chair's first remote meeting.
  - Assign someone to manage each meeting technically (including ensuring that it is taped), and someone else to troubleshoot technical issues during the meeting.
  - Make initial decisions about use of platform features—such as, screen share, chat room, Q&A, electronic hand-raising, and security—understanding that you will probably want to refine your procedures based on experience.
  - If you use language interpreters, work out the technology for managing interpretation (some platforms have well-designed procedures for this).

  - Develop and send out ground rules or guidelines for participation that explain how you will use key remote meeting features and specify etiquette for remote meetings – things like: how to indicate you wish to speak, keeping your audio muted when not speaking, and not speaking until recognized.
  - Develop instructions for members on using the platform, and be sure someone is prepared to explain these at the beginning of the meeting. Be ready to do this at every meeting since you can expect members of the public to be participating for the first time.

- **Help every PC/PB member be able to connect.** Prepare members to join via computer or smartphone, and always provide a call-in number for members without internet. [2]
- **Set an agenda adapted for a remote meeting.** Use a limited agenda focusing on the most important issues/tasks and needed decisions. Schedule time for: introductions at the beginning, instructions to members and guests about use of the technology, review of ground rules and etiquette, a public comment period, and announcements at the end. Minimize "report outs" and long presentations.
- **Prepare presenters.** Set time limits for presentations and discuss the importance of focusing on necessary information. Emphasize that their concise handout or PowerPoint must be included in meeting materials, since some participants (members and public) will have only an audio connection and will need the materials to follow the presentation.
- **Limit meeting materials, and send them and the agenda to members well ahead of the meeting.** Of course you will send them via email. Also post them on your website before the meeting if possible. Some members with internet do not have printers at home, so avoid long PowerPoints and reports that can be hard to read online; provide summaries instead. Since members may depend on smartphones to read materials, avoid PDF format and send documents in MS Word wherever possible. Be sure you know which members need hard copies. If you have a printing contractor that is functioning during the COVID-19 emergency, arrange for meeting packages to go at least to members with no internet or no printer. If only a few members need hard copies, perhaps PCS staff can print them and mail them from home.
- **Look at your Bylaws and policies and procedures, and identify any potential challenges.** Most PC/PB Bylaws do not address emergency situations. If appointment of new members has been delayed, your current members are still allowed to make decisions only if your Bylaws indicate that they will serve until their successors have been appointed. You will still need to make quorum, but may be able to exclude members who formally request leave due to reassignment or expanded job duties during the emergency, if your Bylaws include appropriate provisions.[3]

- **Consider relaxing normal procedures to fit a remote meeting.** This might mean using a simplified version of *Robert's Rules of Order* if that is your process, or understanding how to apply the rules online. For example, it is OK to state a "point of privilege" when someone else is speaking, if you need to note some background noise or distraction that is causing problems, or to use a "point of information" to ask for immediate clarification when this will avoid confusion. You may need to have someone "move to table" a discussion that cannot reasonably be completed during the current meeting. Agree on needed changes before the meeting.

BEGINNING THE MEETING

- **Offer a pre-meeting get-acquainted and catch-up time.** Invite everyone to connect half an hour early for a pre-meeting social period when the meeting platform is open and people can check in with each other and talk informally. If a lot of your members were recently appointed, this approach will increase their comfort level and participation in the meeting. Provide light facilitation to keep order. Other organizations have found this approach useful in keeping people connected and involved.
- **Help everyone get connected.** Allow some time to assist PC/PB members or public guests who are having trouble connecting to your meeting.
- **Review meeting logistics.** After calling the meeting to order and welcoming everyone, explain use of the platform's features. For members, review how to raise your hand to speak, submit a motion, or vote. For the public, show how to sign up for the public comment period. Be sure everyone understands the icons on their screens. For people connecting by telephone, be sure you tell them how they can ask to be recognized – then be sure you check with them for each agenda item so they are not forgotten.
- **Take roll call.** Have someone call the roll, and be sure you have quorum. If not, you might wait a few minutes for latecomers or call a recess to contact absent members. Under some open meeting laws, if there is no quorum, the gathering does not constitute a meeting.[4] Under *Robert's Rules of Order*, you might hear from a speaker or have an informal discussion, and the gathering still counts as an official meeting – but you cannot vote or take any substantive action.[5] If decisions are needed before the next scheduled meeting, you can move to continue the current meeting at a specific date and time.
- **Ask for conflict of interest declarations.** Many PC/PBs require members to state during roll call the service categories for which they have conflicts of interest. If your PC/PB lists conflicts of interest on member "tent signs" along with names, those will not be visible on a remote call, so you may need to have them either stated by the member or projected for everyone to see through a screen share.
- **Review ground rules or Code of Conduct.** Project expectations via screen share. You will probably need some enhanced procedures for remote meetings (state your name when speaking, mute yourself when not speaking, if you have video, be sure it is on when you speak), as well as the usual expectations (arrive on time, read materials ahead of time, limit background noise, minimize distractions, silence your cellphone). A remote meeting open to all can create additional confidentiality concerns, so remind everyone not to share anyone's HIV status or other private information. Make it clear that your Code of Conduct applies to everyone, and that it will be enforced.

RUNNING THE MEETING

- **Follow your clear, limited, focused agenda.** As Chair, watch the time and keep the meeting on track. To keep the meeting running smoothly:
  - Set time frames for agenda items and keep to them.
  - Put issues that require decisions early in the agenda. Deal with essential items based on your annual calendar. Recognize that some less time-critical issues may need to be shelved until the next meeting.
  - Keep presentations tight. Establish and follow time limits for the presentation and discussion, especially when no immediate decision is required.
  - Work with your Co-Chair or PCS to maintain a running list of people who want to speak, and put it in the chat room or Q&A where members can see it – and send a note if they want to be added or no longer need to speak.
  - Politely intervene when members don't keep their comments on topic.
  - Remember to check in with members connected via audio on each major topic to see if they want to speak – it can be as simple as asking them by name if there are only a few, or saying "*Does any member without a video connection want to speak on this issue?*"
  - Ensure that people speak one at a time and that no one speaks twice on the same issue until everyone has had the opportunity to speak once.
- **Manage voting.** If roll call votes are required (always or only for remote meetings), be sure you are prepared for them. If not, consider other options. You could use the chat room or electronic hand-raising if your platform offers them, but will need to ask anyone connecting by phone to state their vote. Some PC/PBs ask first for any abstentions, so it is clear how many people should be voting, then ask for votes in favor and opposed. Always be sure that the numbers add up to the total number of members present – and that you have a quorum. (Contrary to popular belief, it is not permissible under parliamentary procedures to continue decision making if a quorum is not maintained.)[6]
- **Keep all members engaged.** Try the following:
  - Allocate some time at each meeting for updates on services, and ask for comments from the recipient, consumers, and providers. Share and obtain useful information.
  - Watch members onscreen (a task that can be assigned to a Co-Chair or someone else) to see whether they appear engaged.
  - Keep track of members who haven't spoken, and ask if they have something to add. Use techniques such as round robin/going around the virtual table periodically to encourage everyone to speak to the topic under discussion.
  - Ask members to respond to a question via the chat room. For example, "*Do you feel we need more time to discuss this issue?*"

— If you aren't getting adequate discussion or it is coming only from a few members, ask an open-ended question to encourage discussion. For example, "*What do you think about...?*" or "*What feedback/reaction do you have on what was just presented?*"

— If your process is less formal than *Robert's Rules of Order*, consider using polling to get a sense of member perspectives on an issue, especially when time for discussion at this meeting is limited, and the topic will be further addressed at another meeting or in committee.

— Manage your public comment period. Most but not all states require public comment whether the meeting is in-person or remote. Be sure your process allows anyone from the public to ask to speak. Allocate a reasonable period for public comment, usually at the end or beginning of the meeting, and state the time limit for individual comments. Compile a list, call on people in order of their request, and be sure someone is taking note of complaints or concerns that require follow up. If you may need to speak to the individual later, be sure to get a name and contact information.

— End with a summary of accomplishments, next steps, and follow-up responsibilities. Assign someone (your Co-Chair or PCS) to note decisions and follow-up plans throughout the meeting, and do a brief sum-up, so everyone leaves with a clear sense of any committee or individual responsibilities.

— Debrief before adjourning. First ask PC/PB members, then members of the public, what went well and what could be improved, with a focus on how to improve future remote meetings.

AFTER THE MEETING/FOLLOW-UP

- Have a staff and officers debrief. Review participant feedback, decisions made, and follow-up agreed upon. Agree on any changes needed in the agenda, materials, meeting process, and technology use, and any refinements in PC/PB leader and staff roles. Be sure agreements are documented, shared, and acted upon.
- Check the audio or video tape of the meeting. Decide whether to post it or just use it in preparing or checking the minutes.

REFERENCES

1 See *Status of Open Meeting Laws in the District of Columbia and States with RWHAP Part A Programs*. EGM Consulting LLC for Planning CHATT, June 2020. Available at: https://targethiv.org/planning-chatt/more-resources

2 See Connectivity for Members during the COVID-19 Emergency: Tips for PCS Staff. EGM Consulting LLC for Planning CHATT, June 2020. Available at: https://targethiv.org/planning-chatt/more-resources

3 See Bylaws Provisions that Facilitate PC/PB Operations in an Emergency. EGM Consulting LLC for Planning CHATT, June 2020. Available at: https://targethiv.org/planning-chatt/more-resources

4 See laws by state in "What Effect Does Absence of a Quorum Have," Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press, at https://www.rcfp.org/open-government-sections/b-what-effect-does-absence-of-a-quorum-have/.

5 Jim Slaughter, "What Happens if You Don't Have Quorum at the Beginning of a Meeting?" Blog, Black, Slaughter, Black Attorneys at Law, October 28, 2013. See http://lawfirmcarolinas.com/blog/what-happens-if-you-dont-have-quorum-at-the-beginning-of-a-meeting/.

6 "Actions taken without a quorum are void and unenforceable," according to Sarah E. Merkle, "4 Myths about Quorum – And Why the Truth Matters," The Law of Order: A Resource on Parliamentary Procedure & and Law, July 11, 2017. See https://www.lawoforderblog.com/2017/07/4-myths-about-roberts-rules-and-quorum-and-why-the-truth-matters/.

This resource was prepared by JSI Research & Training Institute, Inc. and EGM Consulting, LLC, and supported by the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) under grant number U69HA30795: Ryan White HIV/AIDS Program Planning Council and Transitional Grant Area Planning Body Technical Assistance Cooperative Agreement. This information or content and conclusions are those of the author(s) and should not be construed as the official position or policy of, nor should any endorsements be inferred by HRSA, HHS or the U.S. Government.

PLANNING CHATT JSI EGM Consulting, LLC