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Local Government Options for Conducting Meetings Remotely

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The [Office of Open Government](#) in the Wisconsin Department of Justice issued two advisories in March 2020 indicating that governmental bodies may meet remotely during the COVID-19 public health emergency and still comply with the open meetings law. The [March 16 advisory](#) states that “governmental bodies typically can meet their open meetings obligations, while practicing social distancing to help protect public health, by conducting meetings via telephone conference calls if the public is provided with an effective way to monitor such calls (such as public distribution, at least 24 hours in advance, of dial-in information for a conference call).” The [March 20 advisory](#) further explains that meeting “notices should provide instructions for how the public may access the remote meeting, whether it is to be held via telephone conference call or video conference call. This includes providing the telephone number, video conference link, and any necessary passcodes or other login information.”

Conference call Options:

1. **UW-Shared Services Information Technology** offers telephone conferencing services to Educational, Governmental & Non-Profit groups. Local governments can establish a reservation-less account that is exclusively assigned to the community & available 24/7 upon activation. Once your account is set up, the default is 75 phone lines but can be increased to as high as 150 lines. The rate is \$0.034 per connection/per minute. For more information send an email to: wislineservices@ics.uwex.edu
2. Free telephone conferencing service providers include: freeconference.com and [Google Hangouts](#).
3. Fee-based phone conferencing services include join.me and [UberConference](#).

Web-Based Video Conferencing Options:

1. [Zoom](#)
2. [Skype](#)
3. [Google Hangouts Meet](#)
4. [GoToMeeting](#)

Quick Tips: Consider the following tips as you select and implement remote governmental body meeting technologies. (The League thanks MRSC, an online resource for local governments in Washington state, for posting most of the following information on their website: <http://mrsc.org/Home.aspx>)

- Test the technology ahead of time to ensure that all systems are working by the time your meeting is scheduled to start.
- Video conferencing provides the best experience but an audio only telephone conference option is the easiest to use and least likely to have technical glitches.

- Make sure that the platform you use enables the public to listen in and to participate during times like the public comment period.
- When conducting a videoconference or internet-based meeting, the governmental body should strongly consider providing the public with an alternative telephone dial-in option for observing such a meeting so that lack of internet access is not a barrier to observing the meeting.
- At the beginning of each meeting conducted remotely, the chair of the governmental body should encourage all body members to identify themselves before they begin speaking and not to speak over one another. This will help all those listening to the meeting better understand who is speaking.
- When possible, a governmental body may wish to consider recording the meeting and posting it on its website as soon as practicable after the meeting concludes.
- The chair of the meeting will need a method to mute and unmute (usually included in the software user controls) people so that you won't be interrupted during agenda items that aren't open to public comment.
- Remote meetings with multiple participants can be tricky so be sure to distribute meeting participation rules in advance and enforce them.
- Some vendors, including Microsoft, Google, Cisco and LogMeIn, are making some of their chat and video-conferencing services free in response to the spread of the coronavirus.

Related Resources

- [Working on Council Guidelines? What About Remote Meeting Attendance?](#) MRSC Insight, February 26, 2020 (includes sample policies)
- [Shoreline City Council Remote Public Comment Sign-In Form](#)
- [Cambridge, MA, Zoom Meeting Instructions](#)
- [COVID-19: Ultimate Guide to Free Video Conferencing & Collaboration](#), UC Today, March 16, 2020
- [Public Meetings in the Time of Covid-19](#), Rob Karlinsey, ICMA Blog, March 13, 2020
- [What It Takes to Run a Great Virtual Meeting](#), Harvard Business Review, March 5, 2020
- [Coronavirus prompts collaboration tool makers to offer wares for free](#), Computer World, March 18, 2020