



Equity in Virtual Public Engagement

Developed by the Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Committee of APA RI

Public participation and community engagement are a critical component of a successful planning process. It is a statutory requirement that local and state agencies make opportunities for the public to participate in the decision-making process. But when in-person outreach, meetings, and workshops are no longer options, how can we ensure that virtual community engagement is broad, inclusive, and equitable now and after COVID-19? This is something many planners are trying to figure out. The Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Committee of APA RI has identified some helpful resources on how planners can create equitable public engagement opportunities.

Some key principles of equitable virtual engagement include:

Design Strategies for the Communities You're Trying to Reach. Just like before the COVID-19 pandemic, not all engagement strategies will work in all communities. Even though we're relying on virtual and high-tech engagement solutions, many populations lack consistent, reliable internet access. Couple virtual meetings with telephone options and offer to mail hard copies of materials to people who will be unable to participate in the virtual meeting. Your engagement strategy should be centered on the communities and populations most at risk of experiencing impacts (both adverse and positive).

Put Communities First. Community engagement should center on the community. Make sure people have the opportunity to participate on their own schedules and pace. Non-English speakers and disabled individuals must be considered. Providing multiple opportunities to engage with varied means/platforms can help reach disenfranchised or hard-to-reach populations.

Keep It Simple. Use tools and platforms with which residents have some familiarity and provide detailed instructions prior to the meeting/event so participants can be sure that they know how to access materials when the time comes. Keep in mind that tried-and-true methods of engagement can be just as effective during the current pandemic: phone banking, print mailers, signage, and ADA-accessible and multilingual materials can be posted online and in public spaces.

But Be Creative and Flexible. Everyone is learning, use this opportunity to try new engagement techniques, talk to stakeholders and other planners to share best practices and new ideas, and be flexible. Your first idea or ideas may not work, be transparent about any mistakes, apologize, correct and improve your strategy, and keep going. Whenever possible, find out if there are segments of the population who are not participating in your public meetings and reach out to them more directly before your next engagement opportunity. Public engagement is complicated in the best of times, even more so now, let's take the opportunity to learn together!

We also wanted to note that traditional engagement techniques are not always inclusive and often result in the "usual suspects" attending meetings, participating in discussions, and influencing planning outcomes. Since COVID-19 has upended our typical processes, we have an opportunity to improve the planning practice now and into the future. While some planning activities will need to be paused during this crisis, and all



activities should be conducted in consultation with your municipality's counsel, many public engagement processes can continue! We can use virtual engagement to reach new segments of the population now and after the current physical distancing orders are lifted.

Resources for Equity in Virtual Public Engagement

[Online Public Engagement](#) by the American Planning Association

- A collection of resources providing background and general information about online engagement.

[Leading Inclusively During a Crisis: 7 Ways to Make Virtual Meetings More Inclusive](#) by YW Boston

- This post provides seven actions meeting organizers can take to promote inclusivity in public engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond.

[Equitable Community Engagement During A Global Pandemic & Beyond](#) by Smith Group

- This blog post highlights equity considerations for virtual public meetings in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. It discusses technology requirements and meeting guidelines.

[Principles for Equitable Public Outreach & Engagement During COVID-19 & Beyond](#) by Nelson\Nygaard

- The article provides a set of ideas for inclusive engagement, including baseline equity criteria, to consider when selecting an engagement strategy and accompanying tools.

[Otter.ai](#)

- Otter.ai is a web application that provides speech-to-text technology, converting live speaking into a written transcription. Otter.ai, combined with Zoom, allows participants of all abilities to be engaged live and after the meeting. The account is free with upgrades at a cost.

We will continue to update this list as we learn about new resources and tools. If you have any suggestions to share, please let us know!

APA RI Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Committee Chair: Fabiola Alikpokou (falikipokou@horsleywitten.com)

APA RI Chapter President: Jeff Davis (jdavis@horsleywitten.com)