



Inclusive Virtual Community Engagement During COVID-19

Physical distancing doesn't have to mean we can't maintain, and possibly even deepen, social connections at this time of uncertainty, loss and separation. In-person, face to face engagement is always ideal, but there may be instances where a shift to virtual formats may be necessary to show we are still listening and centering community voice. Remember that while virtual tools can help bring participants together, it's the *people* that create the experience. Our [Authentic Community Engagement to Advance Equity tool](#) may also be helpful in creating inclusive and accessible opportunities.

Planning for Virtual Engagement

Like in-person community engagement, virtual engagement requires a significant amount of planning time to determine purpose and appropriate methods to be successful. While planning, consider the following:

Timing

Is it the right time to consider shifting to online engagement with your community? Would it be helpful for the community to address challenges they are experiencing right now? Look for cues (e.g. news briefings slowing down) and ask community residents themselves if they wish to continue engaging through virtual formats or pause work temporarily. In many communities, particularly vulnerable communities and communities of color, residents may be experiencing new levels of stress, fear and panic that could reduce participation in public engagement. However, there could also be an increase in participation for those who are at home and now have more time.

Digital Justice and Technical Access

Reach out to the community with an easy, short survey to determine access and technology capabilities. This can help guide you in determining which platforms will be more successful and gauge ability to participate. Smartphone mobile technology is often more prevalent than laptops or desktop computers for many communities. When choosing a platform, consider the following:

- Does it require downloading an app, require lengthy account creation, etc. which may prevent easy access and discourage participation?
- Are the formatting and functions compatible on a smartphone?
- Is the tool easy to use and intuitive?



- Is the technology something that can be accessed by non-English speaking or low literacy community members (e.g., could it use info-graphics or other non-verbal communication means)?
- Is the technology something that communities can use repeatedly (i.e., is it free or low-cost, easy to use, does it help answer questions or solve problems that arise frequently)?
- Take into consideration that lack of internet access, unreliable and/or slow access, mobile phone formats, sharing devices/connection with other family members, and limited data plans may present barriers to participation. Are there ways you might be able to engage participants through low tech means such as text, telephone conference calls, or even mailed survey postcards?
- Consider how long your session or format requires participants to be engaged (i.e. meetings, townhalls, etc. should be no longer than 60 minutes. Surveys and polls should be short, taking no more than 3-5 mins to complete.)
- Are there formats that don't require virtual attendance at a specific time so participation can happen at the convenience of community residents? Can recordings be sent at a later date with a mechanism for capturing feedback after the event?
- Consider how you will support accessibility. Will you need language translation and/or virtual interpreters? An American Sign Language interpreter may be needed, in addition to closed captioning functions. How can accommodations be made to ensure all participants will be able to fully participate? [Zoom has ways to host interpreters](#) and the [Colorado Language Connection](#) can assist with supporting video remote interpreting.

Choose the method and engagement level that fits your purpose and community.

	Inform	Consult	Involve	Collaborate	Empower
Example Tools	Newsletter, email, video, website, social media, live stream meetings	Social media discussion, polls, blog, workbook, survey	Ideation, survey, polls, serious games, social media discussion	Online forums, document co-creation, mapping, Twitter chat, video meeting	Decision-making: Online voting, participatory budgeting Community action: Discussion forums
Listen Throughout					

Adapted from IAP2. Susanna Haas Lyons, Civic Engagement Specialist, (2017). [Digital Engagement, Social Media & Public Participation](#), International Association for Public Participation Canada.

For more resources on tools and platforms, see Appendix A.



Preparing for Participation

Public or Private? Will this be an open forum anyone can join or will you need to target specific members of the community? **Be aware that open to the public, anonymous sessions present risk of “Zoombombing,” a method of trolling seeking to interrupt your session by screen sharing explicit images or other inappropriate content. There are various features on video conferencing platforms that can help prevent this from occurring such as setting screen share to Host Only or using waiting room features.

For targeted engagement, consider sending a survey via social media channels to gather interest in participation first. Then invites can be sent to specific respondents that meet the participant criteria. If engagement needs to be limited by a physical geography, geotargeting (Facebook has this feature) can limit who sees the invite or event posting by city or zipcode. Depending on the needs of engagement, you might consider using a registration form to allow for capacity control (different platforms have different limits to the number of participants it can accommodate). Finally, creating a private Facebook group with specific questions asked before allowing entry might assist in more targeted involvement.

Community Compensation- For ongoing engagement such as Community Advisory Boards, etc. consider providing compensation for participation for public at large and community ambassador involvement.

Prepare as the Host- Enlist help from others to take on roles of timekeeper, notetaker, taskmaster, etc. to ensure things run more smoothly. Conduct dry-run tests! Send out information in advance to help guide those unfamiliar with new platforms on how to connect and navigate. *See Appendix B for tips and tricks to using Zoom, a popular video conferencing platform.*

Virtual Facilitation

After your welcome, remember to take time to briefly review platform logistics (chat function, hand raising, how to mute/unmute, change visual format etc). For smaller groups where participants might not know each other, allow ample time for introductions and icebreakers. And don't forget to schedule a quick break if your session goes beyond 1.5 hours.

Just as you would in-person, be sure to follow familiar patterns of engagement e.g. reviewing norms/expectations visually and verbally or co-creating norm agreements using a slide or chat feature. Use check ins often, asking participants for a visual thumbs up or down if they are ready to move on. Phone only connections may require verbal check-ins. Clarifying how to interact in this virtual environment is key to helping users feel comfortable sharing online.

Lecture Less, Engage More. Presenting information in varied ways will help keep your audience engaged. Most platforms have chat features, polls, timers, and screen sharing



features. A common practice is to give a poll question on a topic you need them to think about, show them the results and then talk with them about what they said. Another strategy is to take live notes that the audience can see on a notepad. This increases the opportunity for interactivity, like a flip chart in an in-person training.

When opening the conversation up for open dialogue or discussion, sometimes several participants can begin speaking at the same time. While this is a good indicator that participants feel comfortable speaking, it can cause confusion. If this occurs, the facilitator can call on participants one at a time based on the list of participant names - but only for meetings with fewer than 20 participants. If every participant is using a video chat, another alternative could be to have participants raise a hand and wait for the facilitator to call on them.

If every participant has access to a webcam or video, encourage them to turn on the video feature. Seeing one another fosters engagement and relationship-building. With this suggestion, it's important to not exclude participants who don't have the technology to do this, so only encourage this option if you know everyone has access to webcams (and has simply chosen to not use it).

Be Responsive. Whenever participants reach out to you in the chat or aloud, always respond verbally or using the “chat” function in your platform. If you do not respond, they may assume you are not interested in their ideas. Even worse, they could feel ignored or isolated if their comment isn't acknowledged. It is helpful to have a team member who is constantly monitoring the chat feature.

Understand Why No One Is Talking. What happens if members aren't talking? Silence or reluctance can feel like failure, but it is a common pain point in virtual environments. While no foolproof solution exists to get quiet groups talking, the most effective strategies start from an understanding of why no one is talking. The following are frequent reasons behind less talkative groups.

- **Embrace silence.** Sometimes a pause is needed for participants to process, reflect and take themselves off mute before responding. It can be helpful to remind participants how to take themselves off mute.
- **Misunderstanding of expected participation:** Some may come in with an expectation of a listen-and-learn environment. Be sure to set expectations before the first event and keep reinforcing the idea of a community of practice as an on-going conversation.
- **Discomfort and unfamiliarity:** The online environment can be intimidating for participants because it can feel like public speaking, especially if the event is recorded. When the atmosphere feels overly formal, loosen up the group by using a more conversational and questioning tone. Perhaps start with icebreakers that focus on creating social cohesion before diving into the subject matter.



- **Use signals and prompts to encourage participation.** Some examples might include: *It looks like only about half the group has shared ideas in the chat box. If anyone is having trouble with the chat, let us know, or you can share out loud.*

I see [name] that you just came off mute. Is there something you'd like to add?

Everyone has shared except [name] and [name] who are on the phone. Would you like to share, too?

It looks like [name] has stepped away, so we'll come back to them when they're back.

Whatever the reason, it is important to take an encouraging tone. Chastising a quiet group for not participating will likely render them even quieter. Instead, vary the way you are asking members to interact and celebrate even the smallest moments of communication.

Honor emotions during times of crises. Every participant is going to bring their emotional state into their sessions. And in the middle of a global pandemic, that's going to be an ongoing, unrelenting wave. High stress and emotions lead to different ways of coping and must be acknowledged. To help you can:

- Create space for people to acknowledge emotions they have
- Create a culture of checking in
- Model grace and patience
- Use frequent breaks if needed. Try to “read the room” and ask if a break or moment of reflection might be necessary.

Signs of Success. When your outreach strategy is successful:

- Your participants are representative of your community's geographic, ethnic, age, income, and other demographic distributions. This is a sign that barriers to involvement have been identified and addressed.
- Follow up engagement activity shows repeat interactions.
- You're building relationships with local community groups that represent some of your harder to reach demographics. All opportunities for engagement are accessible to all members of your community.
- You see more resource sharing and relationship building between participants
- You see examples of shared power and community driven solutions. Community power and wisdom are acknowledged when designing policies, practices and programming, by incorporating community voice in decision-making. One example of shared power decision making is participatory budgeting, a decision-making process through which citizens deliberate and negotiate over the distribution of public resources. For more



case study examples, and tools for online engagement, visit <https://www.bangthetable.com/category/case-studies/>

- Community capacity has increased through support and engagement
- Efforts have consistent monitoring, been fully evaluated and adjustments made as needed to improve authentic involvement.
- Efforts have moved from participation to partnership on the community engagement continuum (see chart below).

Colorado’s Community Engagement Continuum				
Increasing Level of Community Involvement, Impact, Trust and Communication Flow				
Increasing Ownership, Empowerment, Skills, Opportunities and Supports of Both Staff and Community				
<i>Please note: Each level has value.</i>				
Participation		Engagement		Partnership
Outreach	Consult	Involve	Collaborate	Share Leadership
Communication flows from the program or initiative to inform community members.	Community members provide one-time or periodic feedback.	Communication flows both ways and community members provide ongoing participation.	Community members influence decision-making.	Community members share power and responsibility making decisions together.
Outcome: To establish communication and outreach channels, while sharing information with the community.	Outcome: To develop connections.	Outcome: To establish visibility of the partner and increased cooperation.	Outcome: Increased trust and partnership-building	Outcome: A strong partnership with bidirectional trust that affects broader community health outcomes.
<i>(Adapted from CDC’s Report “Principles of Community Engagement: Concepts and Definitions from the Literature and Wong, N. T., Zimmerman, M. A., & Parker, E. A. (2010). A typology of youth participation and empowerment for child and adolescent health promotion. American Journal of Community Psychology, 46, 100-114.)</i>				



APPENDIX A: VIRTUAL RESOURCES LIST

International Association for Public Participation, *COVID-19 Information and Resources Resources for Engagement Professionals*. <https://iap2.org.au/covid-19/>

Collaborative Spreadsheet for Digital Public Participation Tools in a time of Social Distancing:

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1FjzDMYZBgyRLCcX3cb2gbFznn_qLiLF0/view

Video Broadcasting Platforms

- [Periscope](#)
- [Twitch](#)
- [Facebook Live](#)

Free Conferencing Tools (as of March 2020):

- Google and Microsoft are offering their [conferencing tools free-of-charge](#) for a limited time.
- GoToMeeting is also offering their [remote work tools free](#) for three months.
- [Webinar](#) from Slack on working remotely
- [Zoom video conferencing](#)
- [Nonprofit Resources for Remote Work During the COVID-19 Outbreak](#)

Virtual Collaboration Tools

- <https://www.polleverywhere.com/> - Live polling for virtual meetings, events, classes, and conferences.
- https://pollunit.com/en/tutorials/dot_voting-- Use online dot voting to help participants prioritize and avoid the “bandwagon” effect by keeping voting hidden until all votes are made.
- <https://conceptboard.com/> - Virtual whiteboard to manage all your visual projects across one shared workspace.
- [Google Docs](#)- Create, edit and collaborate with others on documents
- [Slack](#) - Collaborative project management tool. Conversations happen in channels that are organized by topic, project, team, etc.
- [Digital storytelling](#) - Digital storytelling through videos, pictures and written text can help define community values and provide powerful narrations of lived experiences.

Close the Loop/Feedback Gathering Tools

- [Google Forms](#)
- [SurveyMonkey](#)



APPENDIX B: WORKING WITH ZOOM, TIPS AND TRICKS**

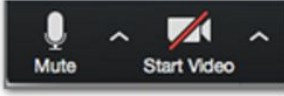
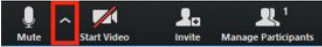

**Adapted from *Zoom Participation - Best Practices*, courtesy of the Colorado Department of Transportation

Remember that many participants may be new to this platform and instructions should be sent in advance to guide them through the connection process to avoid issues. For sample instructions and more tips, please see: [Best Practices for Hosting a Zoom Event](#) or visit <https://www.nl.edu/media/nlu/downloadable/lits/zoom-userguide.pdf>

Here are common issues that occur and how to avoid them in your meetings.

1. Audio feedback is usually caused when a participant creates two separate meeting connections on two separate devices in close proximity to one another. This audio feedback can reverberate to everyone on the call and can discourage participation.
2. The second most frequent problem with online video conference meetings is not being able to hear certain participants. All meeting participants need to know how to mute and unmute themselves and for the meeting host to be able to mute and unmute participants.

It is also recommended to reach out to meeting participants that might have technical difficulties before the meeting to help them get familiar with the video conference platform. Below are three of the most common video participation connection options:

Option 1 – Computer Audio and Video	Option 2 – Phone Audio Only	Option 3 – Computer Video and Phone Audio
<p>Best for participants with reliable internet connections and those who are very comfortable with computer microphone and speaker volume controls. This option works best for those who have participated in video conference meetings previously.</p>	<p>Best for participants that do not require seeing other participants, or presentations given via screen sharing. This option is best for those with a reliable phone connection and perhaps less than reliable internet connections or those without a computer or tablet.</p>	<p>Best for participants with less than reliable internet connections, but have reliable phone connections. This option has the highest potential for audio feedback.</p>
<p>To start, click the ZOOM meeting link that will look something like this: https://cdot.zoom.us/j/(9-digit meeting-id-here)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Turn on/up the volume on your computer 2. Test your computer’s microphone under settings. 3. Note: Participants will start the meeting with their microphones muted. 4. Both Mic and Camera controls can be found in the lower left-hand and look like this:  <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 5. Muting and unmuting your microphone can be controlled by clicking the microphone icon or through the Alt-A keyboard shortcut 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. You can find the call-in number(s) on your meeting invitation. 2. You will be prompted to enter the meeting ID - the nine (9), ten (10), or eleven (11) digit ID provided to you by the host, followed by #. 3. If the meeting has not already started and join before a host is not enabled, you will be prompted to enter the host key to start the meeting, or to press # to wait if you are a participant. <p>The following commands can be entered using your phone's dial pad while in a Zoom meeting:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> *6 - Toggle mute/unmute *9 - Raise hand 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Follow the connection instruction for option 1. 2. If you joined computer audio automatically, you can leave the computer audio and join by phone. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Click the arrow next to Mute/Unmute.  <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2. Click Leave Computer Audio.  <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. Click Phone Call and follow the prompt to dial in.