



# OFFICE OF LEGISLATIVE INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

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## MEMORANDUM

To: Joint Legislative Management Committee  
From: Kevin G. Moore Jr., Director of Information Technology  
Date: April 30, 2020  
Subject: COVID-19 Pandemic - IT Department Update

The Office of Legislative Information Technology has spent the last several weeks working on developing systems and translating in-person processes to digital platforms. This work initially consumed the entire capacity of the IT department and continues to be a rather large portion of our work. With incredible support from legislative offices, the Vermont General Assembly has been able to continue their work during the COVID-19 pandemic with limited interruptions.

To provide a platform for public access to ongoing committee proceedings, every standing committee has been provided a dedicated YouTube channel. This makes it possible for the committee to stream their proceedings to both the public and all media outlets with minimal effort. These proceedings are automatically recorded and made instantly available for review during the live stream, as well as after the stream has ended. There are dedicated channels for the House, Senate, and Joint Rules committees, as well as dedicated channels for the full House and the full Senate. Finally, we've also made available a shared channel for other joint committees that may need to hold meetings while unable to meet in person at the State House.

As of close of business on April 29, 2020, the Vermont General Assembly has collectively generated 397 videos, 34,396 views, and 479h:20m:27s of online content. All of this content was facilitated by approximately 28 people who have not only stepped up and learned yet another new technology under incredibly stressful circumstances but did so with almost no in-person training, instead receiving IT support via remote methods.

Offices of the General Assembly continue to communicate their respective needs to IT as they become known. All offices are readily able to work from home as their policies and procedures permit. IT continues to issue equipment to various people in support of their work, while simultaneously working to improve the various home office setups as both logistics and supplies permit. IT has depleted the usual stock of spare equipment as well as recovering and issuing older equipment originally destined for State surplus. We continue to source equipment as available, but it's worth noting that many IT supply chains are slow to respond due to the increased demand worldwide.

The technologies we've employed as a branch work rather well and continue to be the technology of choice for many large-profile organizations, including the UK Parliament. The ease of use, broad feature set, and the ability to handle residential Internet connections makes Zoom a very attractive platform. Another technology that we've repurposed as a branch is the Everbridge emergency management platform. This platform is an asset of the Capitol Police Department and the processes developed are the results of the work by the Chief of the Capitol Police. The Chief, using his many years of experience in emergency management, understood the need for remote voting was likely to arise and worked with IT early to validate the security and broad functionality of the Everbridge platform. With technical support from IT, the Chief was able to create a process to enable secure remote voting.

A huge volume of training sessions were led by both IT (Zoom) and the Chief of the Capitol police (Everbridge). These sessions were held in either group or one-on-one environments and repeated as necessary to ensure adequate training was available for anyone requiring it. Continued support for these technologies has been a team effort, and as a result, the House has been able to cast votes remotely, in a secure environment, with most members casting their votes within just 60 seconds. In fact, due to the successes of the Vermont General Assembly, Legislative IT has received multiple inquiries from both State and federal government organizations as to how Vermont has implemented these technologies and how various processes have been modified or otherwise digitized. We are committed to being a resource to our peer organizations as they work through many of the same challenges and some challenges entirely unique to their organizations. We'll do our best to be available to them as time and workload permits.

However, as we continue to make more use of these platforms, we too have experienced some challenges, which we continue to work to overcome.

First, while the Zoom meeting platform can display up to 49 videos simultaneously, this doesn't translate to any more than 25 videos being displayed on the respective YouTube stream. After several weeks of sporadic communication back and forth with Zoom support, Zoom recently identified this to be a limitation of YouTube rather than Zoom. Therefore, in order for IT to meet the requirements of the Senate chamber, where all Senators must be visible at all times, we have turned to yet another technology to stream the Senate's chamber meetings and caucuses. This technology is quite a bit more technical than what standing committees are using, but due to concentrated efforts by both the Senate office and IT staff, the Senate office can now start these streams on their own with minimal IT support. As a result, the Senate chamber streams now include all Senators using video, making them viewable on the Senate's YouTube channel at all times.

The second challenge relates to the House chamber having five times the number of members as the Senate – many enabling their video at the same time. This, coupled with network and platform saturation during peak usage times, presents a rather unique challenge to IT. We've seen a few occasions where video feeds from legislators struggle to recover, especially with the rapid muting and unmuting of audio by members during a

voice roll-call vote. As a member is called, they're required to unmute their audio to vote, causing the Zoom platform to shuffle videos around, bringing the member speaking to the foreground of the meeting. Because this procedure is so quick, the video may not be shown on the YouTube stream while the legislator is speaking. However, in all instances to date, the audio has remained uninterrupted. Should it be deemed appropriate, this issue may be resolved by individual House members muting both their video and audio while not presenting. This would reduce the demands on the various systems hosting the meeting and may provide for a more fluid presentation during peak demand times.

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Should the Legislature remain in session over the coming months, IT may need to postpone projects typically completed during the interim to ensure IT has adequate staff to support ongoing meetings, staff, and legislators. This decision would be based on the forecasted volume of meetings and activity during the summer months. Additionally, IT's single seasonal position is set to expire towards the end of May, further tightening the available resources for IT support. Should it be determined that the seasonal position needs to be extended, IT will need to understand the implications of doing so as they relate to labor laws, benefits, and budgets.

The IT department, now less involved in starting, running, and ending various meetings, continues to remain very busy with support requests during meetings. Four of our eight total employees are solely dedicated to meeting support and platform training. Because we expect this demand to lessen over time, we are now shifting our focus to other areas such as consistency in public presentation and providing a process to hold a public hearing should the need arise.

I'm incredibly proud of how our IT team, and other legislative offices have risen to the challenges presented to them during this pandemic. Anecdotally, the IT staff have read and heard of huge support for the public's ability to watch and participate in the legislative process without the need to take a day off from work and travel to Montpelier. Additionally, staff, legislators, and the public can now watch proceedings on their schedule, as all meetings that are streamed over YouTube are then retained for archival access. This allows anyone to pause, rewind, fast forward, or even capture the feed for use by public access television stations as well as commercial television stations. The audio from these streams could also be readily used by radio stations should they choose to do so.

If legislators or legislative offices foresee other challenges IT should be focusing on, we hope to hear of these challenges with enough lead time to properly pair technologies to those needs. We look forward to supporting the organization as a whole and remain committed to providing effective tools and techniques required to facilitate the legislative process.