

Member Survey Results

How we governed this year was different than any other year since we conducted our work on Zoom, in a hybrid set up and in-person. House Rules and my office worked hard to find a balanced approach that kept people safe. We socially distanced throughout the building, wore masks, adjusted schedules, etc.

Are there changes that we made that you think should continue?

Responses

- I feel that it offers greater transparency for the public to be able to access hearings via YouTube or livestream. Enabling witnesses to use a zoom format allows them to have greater interactive access with the committee and legislators to have a wider variety of witnesses if they are unable to attend in person.
- Allowing people who have Covid (or the flu) to participate in committee remotely. Live-streaming and capacity limits on rooms.
Masks at every door - let's keep that going.
- Adjusting schedules to help with lunch and other bottlenecks
- I think we have to be prepared to be more flexible....hybrid might not be ideal, but it works. There will always be circumstances (illness, childcare, snow days, etc.) that would be far more manageable with a permanent hybrid option. I hope we can treat each other like adults and with compassion in navigating that kind of flexibility without making people jump through hoops when life happens.
- It's hard to know what next year will bring in terms of the virus, but I would like to see us get back to all in-person, if that is possible. Even if that means some precautions, like masking. While zoom helped us do our work, it has shortcomings.
- I would advocate for an ongoing, and expanded, hybrid option. Participation by Zoom in committee and on the floor worked well. This should be expanded to allow for remote participation and voting for extenuating circumstances, such as weather, health, childcare emergencies.

Responses

- I think we need to continue to use the remote zoom feature hybrid & in person model going forward to allow members to attend and vote in committee meetings, study or task force committee meetings and for the floor under certain conditions. Those conditions should be limited to daycare or school issues with members children, members with an illness so as not to spread it to everyone in the building, and inclement weather. I would encourage the rules committee to explore other reasons for members to use the remote feature.
- I would continue with masking as needed if COVID re-surfaces, as well as conducting testimony to committees via Zoom.
- I did become more aware how difficult it is for people with physical challenges to participate as a Legislator. I would hope that the Rules Committee would explore the possibility of permitting people that are physically challenged to be able to participate remotely on a permanent basis.
- Maximizing flexibility and increasing access by allowing remote options for every possible type of meeting, from caucus, to committee, to floor.

What did you think didn't work well
or could be improved?

Responses

- Find a way to lessen the duplication of bills. Sometimes several bills can be combined into one bill. This would free up legislative counsel.
- If you are sick or can't be present for votes you don't vote. COVID should no longer be used as an excuse for remote participation.
- I would like the body to consider expanding the rules to allow for remote participation. The goal wouldn't be to create a full-time virtual legislator but adjust our workplace policy and procedures to be more accessible for more people. Moving forward, we should have that same opportunity for our "health, safety, and well being" to be recognized as an important concern with the opportunity to attend and vote without a COVID reason.
- We need to find a way for all sick members to participate remotely not just those with Covid. I understand the complexity of this but it does not make sense to have one medical issue be a higher priority than another potentially equally debilitating illness..
- Although I appreciated having empty conference rooms available, it was often difficult to have more than one person in the room. Many times the rooms were used for zoom meetings or private conversations, and the doors were locked. I miss the larger legislative lounge, but understand that it has a better use now for the Appropriations Committee. I am not sure why the use differs in the smaller committee rooms vs. the old Legislative Lounge.

Responses

- The cafeteria situation could use more room.
- Sometimes it was difficult to find an open legislative meeting room, as some legislators used them for separate meetings. It would be helpful to figure out breakout rooms that accommodate phone calls and meetings, and those for working silently. I think we should also be able to vote for vetoes remotely under certain circumstances, as we are allowing those with Covid-related concerns to vote remotely on the floor.
- Improve the limit of time for devotions to 3 minutes. It seems that many were in excess of 15 minutes from some of our members.

When House Rules meets to discuss strategies to make it easier for people to serve, what barriers or challenges do you face and what policy changes could we make to help?

Responses

- Legislators should be paid a livable wage with full year benefits. This is clearly an equity issue.
- if we had a true statewide school calendar, we could eliminate town meeting recess in favor of a February week that coincides with kids vacation.
- You have to be present in the Statehouse to participate.
- I spent many many hours in the off session last summer doing research on my committee topic with no salary/stipend. The knowledge and information I gained was crucial coming into the second year. Acknowledging that legislators work off session and deserve some form of off session remuneration would be a start. Constituent service is year round. Some form of committee staff beyond the committee assistant to support legislators with research would be invaluable.
- I have thought about this a lot! I feel that it would be a tremendous help if legislators could participate in the State Employee Health Insurance programs, and other benefits. We are the only branch of state government that does not receive benefits and this does not make sense. As we are part-time legislative branch employees, we could contribute 50% for all benefits of state employment. I am assuming that other full time employees of the legislative branch are able to access these benefits.

Responses

- Personally, I have no challenges in serving. I will say that the Session could be a lessor period of time. Perhaps 100 or less days. I am sure that would entice more to run for office.
- Perhaps it is time to review remote voting during illness. - I personally hate the idea, as I think voting in person is extremely important, but, perhaps it is time to at least discuss.
- Again, my personal thought! We've all heard the complaints and comments that the pay is too low, there are no benefits, childcare is difficult, the days are too long and so on. We should seriously consider shortening the session to a drop-dead date (Other states do this, I'm thinking Utah) however, we should not reduce the legislative budget and consider increasing legislative pay with the savings of a shortened session.
We should also consider doing a two-year Transportation and General Fund budget cycle as we do now with the Capital Bill. You'll get some serious push back on this, but it is doable and would take a biennium to do it, but I think it's worth a conversation.

When you talk with people serving in office, what's the biggest barrier you hear about?

Responses

- Affordability. Low-income, BIPOC and English learners have much less wealth than the dominant culture. A livable wage salary and benefits would go a long way to diversify the chamber.
- TIME and MONEY: many folks who would love to serve cannot take the time away from their primary jobs and still juggle childcare, school, and household chores on a greatly reduced salary. Many places of employment will not allow them to take four months of the year off to attend Legislative sessions.
- Flexibility from their employer
- Younger people often cannot afford to serve. Difficulty keeping a job while serving. That was the case for me, I could not consider serving until I retired and was financially secure.

Responses

- Financial compensation for legislators is a huge barrier. Childcare and family care issues also create significant barriers that could be somewhat managed with increased flexibility to participate remotely.
- The lack & cost of childcare, low pay and lack of benefits as well as the ability to get the time off from their job to serve.
- Pay, schedule, uncertainty about hours especially for commuters, lack of flexibility with family and work schedules, life/work balance, health--how unhealthy the job is.
- The length of the session, low pay, no benefits, off session constituent services requiring out of pocket expenses, housing costs in Montpelier, the amount of money that it takes to run a campaign and what the sacrifice is you make personally to serve.
- Small children at home is one I hear a lot, as well as the fundamental challenge of serving as a legislator while also holding down a full-time job.

What are some specific changes you think we could make to broaden the opportunity for people to serve?

Responses

- Increase pay or offer healthcare options
- Raise the pay during session and offer a small stipend off-session. Offer health insurance. Offer hybrid options.
- Leave it as is
- Increase the terms to 4 years; include health care benefits, if needed, allow for a longer winter break (10-14 days) in the winter.
- Tie leg. calendar to school calendar for vacations. It is tough to give up 2 school vacations with family. A statewide school calendar will be under review this summer.
- Health benefits, increased wage, make the building more accessible, and use technology to increase access

Responses

- Better publicity of the actions of the legislature and its committees. When people know more precisely what goes on, some will develop a greater interest in arranging their lives so they have the opportunity to commit to run for election.
- Expand employment protection for folks with less than full time work, currently the statute only protects folks that are working full time, provide pathways to health insurance while in the legislature, increased pay, hybrid attendance, holding mentor opportunities so folks can learn about serving in the legislature, invite folks in to see what it is like
- Increase in pay and some type of benefits such as medical, retirement.
- A daycare center in the pavilion that could be used by our staff and legislators. And offering health insurance, even if people have to contribute to the premium. Couldn't we get on the state health insurance policy somehow?