

Testimony to: Legislative Advisory Committee on the State House

During the 2020 and 2021 Legislative sessions I had the privilege of serving as the Committee Assistant for the House Committee on Corrections and Institutions. In 2020, I filled-in on several occasions to assist the Senate Committee on Institutions and the House Committee on Education.

The most important lesson I learned while working during the pandemic is that the Vermont Legislature can function effectively remotely when needed, albeit not ideally.

In my experience, here is a list of things that worked well:

- With few exceptions, Zoom performed well. It was generally reliable and stable. With adequate hardware and a fast Internet connection, audio and video quality was excellent. Most legislators quickly learned how to operate the software, and many users became proficient.
- Once several security measures were implemented, and Committee Assistants learned a few new protocols, Zoom session security procedures prevented Zoom Bombings and entrance of uninvited participants into committee meetings.
- Live streaming via YouTube also performed well. It worked so well that it is difficult to imagine turning back to just an in-person legislature. I believe the general public, advocates, lobbyists, people who testify, and legislators all benefited from greater access to meetings. The public can be more involved with the legislative process when committee meetings are livestreamed and stored digitally. Legislators are more informed when they can review and follow recorded meetings that they were unable to attend. I believe Zoom and YouTube (or similar technologies) should mark the end of using Tascam audio recorders in State House committee rooms.
- As many people have pointed out, remote witness testimony was extremely beneficial. It made it much easier and efficient for Committee Assistants to build their committee's agendas. Witnesses appreciated not having to travel to the State House. I would not be surprised if the total number of witnesses who testified and the hours of testimony that they presented were higher during the pandemic than any previous legislative session.
- Although House members often remark about missing the ability to, on the spur of the moment, walk down to a Senate Committee room or up and down to House Committee Rooms located in the 30s and 40s; I noticed how using Zoom facilitated rapid participation in multiple meetings during a short period of time. Jumping in and out of Committee Meetings without having to physically move was helpful for legislators and attorneys.
- Speedy, remote communication between Committee Assistants, Committee Assistant Mentors, Legislative Operations staff, Legislative Counsels, and JFO staff was extremely useful. These types of interactions and the technologies that support them should be promoted and enhanced. On many occasions I used Zoom to communicate with my mentor, with my committee Chair, and others. These interactions gave me access to people I could not have met face-to-face in a timely manner, even if we were in the State House. If we become more physically dispersed in the 2022 Legislative Session, then training people to effectively communicate using various new technologies, not just email and phones, could be very useful.

In my experience, here is a list of things that did not work well:

- There is no doubt in my mind that 8 hour Zoom meetings last session were physically and mentally tiring. All members of my committee remarked how draining it was to sit in front of a computer screen for hours each day. I strongly suspect that attention spans were negatively impacted, and that legislating was less interesting and less “fun” for most members.
- In-person social and business interactions are invaluable and irreplaceable. Shaking a hand, watching people interact in the same room, evaluating body language, tangibly feeling the ardor of the moment, casting glances and giving a hug are not the same, or impossible in a Zoom room. It is very clear that legislators sorely missed the in-person experiences of legislating. Hallway conferences, lunch break chats, social gatherings and just getting to know fellow legislators were all missing or sharply curtailed. Many legislators I know resented missing these interactions. Building a cohesive, collaborative, efficient committee is more difficult while working in a remote environment.
- In my opinion, the software we used last session to transcribe committee meetings was inadequate. There were too many errors in the transcripts.
- Some legislators routinely request paper copies of documents and/or have difficulty printing at home. There are multiple reasons for their troubles – limitations of their iPads, lack of an AirPrint compatible printer, document sizes that are too large for their printers, and inexperience using their devices. Copy services in the State House are exceptionally good, and the assistance provided by Tony Morse, Copy Room Technician, is great. However, supporting legislators’ printing needs while they are working remotely is sometimes difficult and often expensive. I support efforts, as much as possible, toward a paperless legislative environment. Professional development/training activities that promote legislators’ ability to store, organize and access documents is needed.
- I have heard members of the House Corrections and Institutions Committee describe how unfortunate it is, especially for new legislators, not to have experienced the traditions, formalities, and etiquettes; or met the people who work in the State House. Long-serving legislators contend that working in the building, observing and participating in the legislative process and being part of the State House culture is the best way to become an effective and productive representative. Working remotely via videoconference does not substitute for legislating in the State House,

Summary of things I experienced as a Committee Assistant during the pandemic that I would keep and/or improve:

1. Continue to offer expanded access to the General Assembly and to the legislative process by using technologies that afford livestreaming, recording and archival capabilities. Livestreaming meetings where some participants are face-to-face and others are remote will require new videoconferencing hardware and software, as well as extensive testing and training.
2. Allow witnesses to provide testimony from remote locations, not just in-person.
3. Explore and promote new ways of communicating between legislators and legislative staff. These communication strategies should emphasize ease of use, speed, multi-tasking, and improved information flow and sharing.

4. Improve transcription of meetings for the hearing impaired.
5. Strive to go paperless as much as possible, while at the same time improving members ability to store, organize and access documents. This could involve professional development as well as new software and hardware.

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