

Effective and Inclusive Meetings:

Best Practices, Promising Practices

To enhance democratic participation and meaningful accessibility for all, the Act 133 (2024) Working Group recommends the following practices and resources for inclusive, effective meetings.

"All this will not be finished in the first one hundred days. Nor will it be finished in the first one thousand days, not in the life of this Administration, nor even perhaps in our lifetime on this planet. But let us begin."

John F. Kennedy, Inaugural Address, January 20, 1961

Guiding Principles

Voting and petitioning the government are basic rights in a democracy. Everyone should be able to participate easily and meaningfully.

Best practices are evidence-based, proven techniques with extensive research demonstrating consistent effectiveness across diverse settings. Promising practices are innovative strategies with initial, but limited, positive data suggesting potential for success. Best and promising practice recommendations supplement, but do not replace, existing civil rights protections in State and federal law.

Focus on creating spaces and services that everyone can use. Extra steps should be added when needed to meet specific needs.

Each community may need different tools and approaches to make participation easy and fair. Communities should keep reviewing and improving these efforts over time.

Meeting Preparation

Be clear about purpose and process. Decide on the purpose of the meeting. Decision-making? Exploratory? Match the meeting format and process to that purpose.

Provide a welcoming meeting space. Ensure your meeting room, building, facilities, and parking area are easy for everyone to use. Ask Disability Rights Vermont and/or others with expertise in your community for help in assessing the accessibility of your space. Familiarize or re-familiarize yourself with the process and requirements for handling ADA accommodation requests.

Proactively seek broad and diverse participation. Think carefully about who will be affected, whose input is needed, and who may be marginalized or discouraged from attending, then invite those participants to ensure the full range of voices. Be upfront about what meeting tools and services will be available and ask for input about what additional accommodations may be useful.

Plan for inclusivity. Make sure to plan for accessibility. Set aside money for access services. Provide a meeting space that is easy for everyone to use and offer both in-person and online ways to join. Have interpreters, captioners, and translated documents available when needed. Think about offering transportation, food, and/or childcare to help people attend (and do not rely on community members who may want to participate to provide these services during the meeting). Plan to electronically record all meetings for people who cannot attend or who need technological support.

Provide meaningful advance public notice. Prepare a public notice early, so people have time to plan. Draft a well-organized and clear agenda; organize topics by importance and public interest. Make sure the structure is easy to follow. Use plain language by avoiding jargon and acronyms. Include key details about how the public can participate and assign a specific contact with ADA training for accommodations requests. Be creative with outreach by sharing the notice in multiple ways (paper and electronic formats). Post in locations that are easy to access and ensure some are free of cost.

Practice technology and use of physical space beforehand. How is your parking? Seating? Lighting? Acoustics? Have a plan in place for technology moderation and glitches and electronic recording and captioning. If an executive session may be authorized, consider how to provide for privacy.

Meeting Structure, Facilitation, & Community Standards

Address community standards at the outset. Clearly articulate how the meeting will proceed, including when and how attendees may participate. Explain what assistive tools and services are available. Make sure everyone in the meeting knows how to use them. Be clear about expectations, including time limits.

Think broadly about public participation and be prepared to be flexible. As possible and before a meeting begins, adjust public comment style, timing, and time limits to suit the topic and participants at hand. Offer alternative ways to submit public comment.

Facilitate with all participants in mind. Ask that participants identify themselves when they speak, especially if they are in a hybrid meeting with multiple participants in a conference room. Use a microphone if in-person. Be descriptive when referring to visuals. Spell out technical terms or jargon. Address side-chat and document-sharing protocol before the meeting occurs and maintain the standard throughout the meeting.

Speak up. If someone is excluded or marginalized in violation of community standards or by application of the community standards, address it promptly.

Hybrid Meetings

Build for hybrid. Acquire and use effective technology that provides a familiar, inclusive experience for all participants in the spaces and platforms you are using.

Staff for hybrid. Adequately provide for in-room and online support. Ensure multiple staff members know how to perform necessary support tasks.

Facilitate strategically. Ensure participants attending remotely know how to use their gear's technical functions, and participants in the room use microphones and cameras to their advantage. Strive to connect all participants into one seamless experience. Be prepared to make space for contributions from all participants and handle any disruptions.

Education & Training

Center learning. Provide officials and staff with time, resources, and support for continuing education about leadership, open governance, civil rights, facilitation, and technology. Priority topics include:

- Meeting accessibility, including handling of ADA accommodation requests
- Hybrid meeting facilitation
- Use of meeting technology and platforms
- Vermont's Open Meeting Law
- Robert's Rules and other rules of meeting procedure

Keep focus on the ADA and Vermont's Public Accommodations Act. Even when not required by law, designate and train an ADA coordinator or committee to streamline compliance, offer education, and assist accommodation requests.

Create educational opportunities for people participating in public meetings. Encourage those who are newly adult, new Americans, new to town, and/or newly engaged/re-engaged by directing people to training and resources that support civic participation. In addition to the topics above, educational initiatives might address town meeting procedure and how to run for or seek appointment to offices and committees.

Community Engagement & Civics

Create a culture of interest and inclusion. Establish a town committee dedicated to accessibility. Establish a town committee dedicated to promoting democracy. Put

together a town user's manual or operating guide. Adopt an inclusivity statement. Follow an inclusive process to invite and incorporate community input into vision and goals for the community. Create opportunities to participate in informal volunteerism and celebrations.

Look for and address barriers to meaningful participation. Use only locations with accessible parking and buildings. Provide a visual and written description of an accessibility map. Review your website and communications for ease of navigability.

Be clear about the roles and responsibilities of all participants in civic engagement.

Community Partners & Additional Resources

American Civil Liberties Union of Vermont. ACLU-VT defends and advances civil liberties for all people across a broad range of constitutionally protected rights and freedoms. Our efforts are focused on a broad range of issues impacting Vermonters' constitutional rights, including racial justice, criminal legal reform, women's rights, gender justice, LGBTQ rights, disability rights, voting rights, immigrants' rights, freedom of speech, religious liberty, reproductive freedom, privacy, and more. Integrating litigation, policy advocacy, organizing, public education, and strategic communications, we work to realize Vermont's promise of justice and equality for all people – with special emphasis on those who have historically been denied the full protections of our laws. <https://www.acluvt.org/>

Disability Rights Vermont. DRVT is part of the national Protection and Advocacy system, which was established by Congress to strengthen oversight and increase resources to improve conditions for individuals with disabilities. DRVT provides information, referrals, and advocacy services—including legal representation when appropriate—to individuals with disabilities across Vermont. In addition to individual advocacy, DRVT works to promote positive systemic change on issues affecting the rights and well-being of people with disabilities. <https://disabilityrightsvt.org/>

Vermont Access Network. Municipalities and community members are encouraged to reach out to the local community media center that serves their region for hybrid meeting support, live streaming of meetings, and providing transparency and community access to the proceedings of local government. The Vermont Access Network is a coalition of 24 community media centers serving the needs of communities for government, public, and educational access using technology tools and training to improve civic life. <https://vermontaccess.net/>

Vermont Center for Independent Living. VCIL is a statewide disability justice organization directed and staffed by people with disabilities. We work to promote the dignity, independence and civil rights of Vermonters with disabilities. Like other independent living centers across the country, VCIL is committed to services for all

disabilities, promotion of active citizenship, and working with others to create services that support free-choice and full participation in community life. <https://www.vcil.org/>

Vermont Department of Disabilities, Aging and Independent Living DAIL's mission is to make Vermont the best state in which to grow old or to live with a disability – with dignity, respect, and independence. DAIL is committed to fostering the development of a comprehensive and coordinated approach to the provision of community-based systems of services for older adults and people with disabilities. Our goal is to enhance the ability of these Vermonters to live as independently as possible, actively participating in and contributing to their communities. <https://dail.vermont.gov/>

Vermont Human Rights Commission The HRC's mission is to promote full civil and human rights in Vermont. The HRC protects people from unlawful discrimination in housing, state government employment, and public accommodations, including public meetings. We pursue our mission by enforcing laws, educating the public, providing information and referrals, advancing effective human rights public policies, and conciliation/mediating disputes. To request an investigation into discriminatory treatment during a public meeting or related to voting access, please contact human.rights@vermont.gov or visit our website at <http://hrc.vermont.gov>.

Vermont Municipal Clerks and Treasurers Association. The VMCTA is a professional association that welcomes everyone interested in the offices of municipal Clerk and Treasurer. Whether you're in the thick of the profession, retired, or considering a career in municipal service, VMCTA offers a community that provides information, education, mentoring, fellowship, advocacy, and inspiration. <https://vmcta.org/>

Vermont School Boards Association. The VSBA is a private, nonprofit membership association dedicated to serving Vermont's elected school boards. We provide our members with services, support and counsel as they lead their districts, navigate relationships and promote public education across Vermont. <https://www.vtvsba.org/>

Vermont Secretary of State. The SOS delivers essential services to protect the public, provide reliable information, support businesses, individuals, and government, strengthen democracy, preserve our history, and build our community. The SOS Elections division protects the integrity of campaigning and elections in Vermont. It administers Vermont's elections, oversees campaign finance reporting and lobbyist disclosure laws, and encourages civic participation. SOS also works to strengthen democracy by providing municipal, open government, and civics education. <https://sos.vermont.gov/>

Vermont League of Cities and Towns. VLCT is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization with the mission of serving and strengthening Vermont local government. Owned by its member municipalities, VLCT provides educational workshops and consulting advice for municipal officials so that they can deliver excellent service to their residents; support for legislation that strengthens local government; comprehensive insurance coverage for municipalities; and a Municipal Assistance Center for member consultation on a wide

range of municipal issues. VLCT believes in: the critical role that local government plays in the lives of Vermonters; municipal authority over municipal issues; representative and participatory local government; the value of public service and excellence in municipal leadership; a commitment to honesty, integrity, and the highest ethical standards among public officials; the value of collaboration as a means of strengthening cities and towns; and the individuality of each local government. <https://www.vlct.org/>