

HOUSE GOVERNMENT OVERSIGHT COMMITTEE
PROPONENT TESTIMONY
HB 55
MARCH 25, 2021

Chair Wilkin, Vice Chair White, Ranking Member Sweeney and all the members of the Government Oversight Committee. I am presenting this testimony virtually on behalf of the State Policy Advocates of Ohio for National Council of Jewish Women (NCJW) and the co-chairs of the Promote the Vote, Protect the Vote committee of National Council of Jewish Women Cleveland Section (NCJW/Cle). We urge you to vote in support of HB 55 to allow virtual meetings and testimony at the Statehouse during the current COVID-19 pandemic.

Since the onset of the pandemic, virtual meetings have become broadly accepted as an effective and essential way for citizens to engage with our public institutions. According to the AP News “more public bodies than ever are livestreaming their meetings for anyone to watch from a computer, TV or smartphone. The Ohio legislature should not be an exception. According to David Cuillier, an associate journalism professor at the University of Arizona who is president of the National Freedom of Information Coalition “... this is ... helping move us toward a country where citizens can be more involved in their government through Zoom, and that’s a good thing.” We agree and believe the safe, increased involvement of Ohio citizens with their state government is a good thing for Ohio.

The overwhelming majority of states have allowed virtual testimony during the pandemic. Currently, Ohio is an outlier and one of just eight states that still refuses to allow safe, remote testimony. According to the AP survey, just eight states—Alabama, Arkansas, Iowa, Indiana, Louisiana, Missouri, Nebraska and Ohio—still do not allow people outside the Capitol to testify remotely by phone or video during committee hearings. Ohio legislators are shutting down public voices while doing business irresponsibly. For a state that has allocated millions in the new budget to advertise that Ohio is a forward-thinking state, this refusal to allow virtual testimony is simply backwards thinking. Because the majority of state legislatures across the country have been able to maintain or even improve their processes by integrating virtual technology, we’re confident that the Ohio legislature could make the process work, if they truly want to promote broad public engagement and diverse testimony.

Originally a skeptic, Republican Rep. John Kavanagh (AZ House), chairman of the House Government and Elections Committee later allowed it after he saw that virtual testimony worked fine in other committees. “The problem, of course, is not hearing what people have to say. It’s getting a grossly distorted representation of people’s views because certain organized groups totally dominate the input,” Kavanagh said.”* Virtual testimony will allow this better representation.

House Speaker Bob Cupp recently is quoted as saying, “We would like to do something. But the remote committee meeting presents problems for us, because our process always has been to open up committee hearings to anyone who wants to come in and testify. But when you go remote and open it up, you can(’t) just figure out how many people might want to do that. It makes our process impossible,” he said. We agree that more people might want to testify, but we believe that’s a good thing. We disagree that it will make the process impossible.

The Covid pandemic should not shut down Ohioans voices or force legislators to work in an environment where they could be exposed to a potentially deadly disease. According to Ohio Public Health, Ohio has experienced 18,340 deaths and 52,207 hospitalizations as of 3/19, and the Ohio legislature's refusal to enforce CDC guidelines for safe public gatherings, it is no wonder that many Ohioans choose not to participate in democracy rather than risk catching and spreading this dangerous virus.

Allowing virtual testimony is forward thinking, good for democracy, and good for Ohio. Giving all Ohioans the opportunity and access to be safely heard will result in a more informed legislature, a more transparent and inclusive legislative process and better laws. We strongly urge you to promote citizen participation in our state's democracy and join the 42 legislatures across the country that allow virtual meetings and testimony.

Thank you,

Susan Reis and Erinn Stark, co-State Policy Advocates of Ohio for NCJW
Jodi Jackson and Barbara Friedman Yaksic, co-chairs of the Promote the Vote/Protect the Vote
Committee of NCJW/CLE

*David Lieb, March 14, 2021 "Pandemic redefines 'public' access to government meetings" AP News