

THE PUBLIC MEETING EXPERIENCE



How can government agencies make meetings more accessible?

Local government meetings in Cleveland — and throughout the state — are governed by Ohio's open meeting laws. Those laws require that any decision-making body must: give notice of its meetings, make minutes available to the public, and keep the doors to those meetings — whether physical or virtual — open for residents.

But making meetings truly accessible for residents often requires more.

Cleveland Documenters trains and pays residents to attend and document local government meetings. Since October of 2020, we've documented more than 600 local government meetings.

For this guide, we asked Documenters to use that collective experience to suggest ways to increase transparency and accessibility so that all community members have the opportunity to engage in our local democracy.

DO RESIDENTS KNOW WHERE TO GO TO FIND MEETINGS?

In order to participate, residents need to know the **date, time and location** of a meeting far enough in advance to make arrangements to attend.

Officials can **post information in a reliable place online** or create an email or text message option so residents can sign up to receive notice of meetings, links to virtual spaces and information on cancellations.

DOES THE AGENCY PROVIDE AN ACCURATE MEETING AGENDA PRIOR TO THE MEETING?

Knowing what officials will discuss during a meeting allows residents to follow along or to brush up on a topic before a meeting.

Officials should post meeting agendas in a reliable place where residents can easily find them several days in advance.

"A public agenda is helpful because then I can focus on what people say in meetings rather than specifics about ordinances."

— Documenter Xavier Yozwiak



ARE OFFICIALS PAUSING TO EXPLAIN CONFUSING CONCEPTS OR CLARIFY PROCESSES?

Residents are part of public meetings too, and they may not be familiar with procedures or legal rules followed by decision-making bodies. **Clue them in.**

Explain **what is happening** and **what the next steps are** to help residents figure out where and how to engage.

"What would help the most would be name tags in front of the people speaking. It also helps when a person's name is spoken when asked to speak."

— Documenter Mildred Seward

"It helps if they introduce themselves and their titles clearly."

— Documenter Carolyn Cooper

CAN RESIDENTS FIGURE OUT WHO IS TALKING AND WHAT THEIR ROLE IS?

Take time to **identify people who speak or who make presentations**. It helps residents navigate discussions that are part of the decision-making process.

Meeting hosts can announce names (including spelling) and titles and use physical placards and on-screen identification during meetings.

Agencies can **keep websites updated with photos and names** of key meeting participants.

CAN A PERSON ATTENDING THE MEETING HEAR AND SEE CLEARLY?

For in-person and livestreamed meetings, **residents should be able to hear the discussion and see who is talking** as well as any presentations they are making.

Do a self-audit. Watch or listen to a recorded meeting to get the viewer's perspective.

"It's important to me that the room is very visible, that the speakers speak clearly and slow down when speaking a little."

—Documenter Janenell Smith

"Sometimes, there is too much jargon. Sometimes the boatload of jargon along with fast talking can make a head spin."

— Documenter Tina Scott

CAN SOMEONE WHO DROPS INTO THE MEETING FOR THE FIRST TIME UNDERSTAND WHAT IS HAPPENING?

Government jargon is a barrier for residents trying to understand what is happening.

Pause to decode a term or to spell out and define an acronym - eliminate alphabet soup! It makes conversations more accessible to residents.

DO RESIDENTS HAVE ACCESS TO MATERIALS OR SLIDES SHARED WITH OFFICIALS DURING THE MEETINGS?

Residents should have **easy access to informational presentations** or slides shared during meetings.

Slides should be shown on-screen during meetings and be visible on livestreams. **Presentations should be available before or after meetings** in a place where residents can easily find them—such as on the public body's website.

ARE MEETING RECORDINGS AND MINUTES ACCESSIBLE TO THE PUBLIC?

It's best when meetings are held at times that are **convenient for residents**. Many are not. Access to meeting recordings provides more opportunities for residents to be informed and to engage with local government.

Include options, such as **closed captions**, during meeting livestreams and videos for residents with hearing challenges or who simply need assistance following the conversation.

Spend adequate time on each slide of a presentation and make presentation materials available after or before the meeting.

— Documenter JB Bergin