

Q&A from the Iowa Public Information Board

Did you know that the Iowa Public Information Board staff is available to assist you with questions or problems involving open meetings and public records in Iowa? During the month of June 2020, 73 contacts were made with the Iowa Public Information Board office.

QUESTION: How do we hold open meetings if there is a concern about COVID-19 exposure?

ANSWER: A Checklist for Conducting Electronic Meetings Iowa Code section 21.8 outlines the guidelines to hold an electronic meeting when there are valid concerns that an in-person meeting is “impossible or impractical”. With the restrictions governmental bodies are facing due to the COVID-19 pandemic, electronic meetings have become more common. However, it is important that governmental bodies conduct these meetings in a transparent manner to avoid violating open meetings laws.

To hold an electronic meeting all of the following must occur:

1. Public access to the conversation of the meeting must be available.
2. The provisions of section 21.4 (notice) must be followed. (The place of the meeting is the place from which the communication originates or where public access is provided to the conversation.)
3. Minutes must be kept and must include a statement explaining why an in-person meeting was impossible or impractical.

Here is a checklist to follow when planning your electronic meeting:

1. Research options that will work best for your community. Do you have the equipment and infrastructure to hold a meeting with video access? Do you have a speakerphone, recording device, camera and microphone, or the other devices needed to conduct the meeting?
2. Remember your community/audience needs. Your citizens may not have sophisticated electronic devices or the internet access you have at your

disposal. Even though you are capable of doing a video chat, they may not be able to access your meeting.

3. How can you notify your community on how to access the meeting? Posting a notice with access instructions on the bulletin board at the main office does not work if the building is locked. Perhaps having a ‘test run’ of the system will allow the public (and your officials) to practice how to do an electronic meeting.
4. Even if your council or board plans to meet in person, having remote access available for those members of the public who are at high risk for infection is a way to promote government transparency.
5. If you need to conduct a closed session during your meeting, arrange ahead on how to properly conduct that meeting. You may need to have an alternate connection (such as a conference call number) for use during the closed session only. Remember to follow the requirements for detailed minutes and an audio recording of your closed session.

The IPIB recommends that you discuss how and when to hold an electronic meeting with your legal counsel. You may also contact the IPIB to discuss ways to be safe and transparent through the IPIB website (www.ipib.iowa.gov) or by telephone (515-725-1781).

WHO CAN CONTACT THE IPIB AND HOW LONG DOES IT TAKE? Any person can contact the IPIB for assistance by telephone (515-725-1781), by email, or on the IPIB website. In 2020, 431 identifiable people contacted the IPIB. Of these, 182 were private citizens, 200 were government officials or employees, and 49 were members of the media. In 2020, 72% of the incoming contacts were resolved the first day, 12% were resolved in one to five days, and 16% were resolved in six or more days. Opinions, rulings, FAQs, reports, and training documents are available on the IPIB website – www.ipib.iowa.gov.

FORMAL COMPLAINTS	ADVISORY OPINIONS	DECLARATORY ORDERS	INFORMAL COMPLAINTS	INFORMAL REQUESTS	MISCELLANEOUS	JUNE TOTALS
9	2	0	14	33	15	73

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If you're interested in getting more information on uploading your paper to NewzGroup, please contact Susan James at sjames@inaneews.com.