

Making Meetings Accessible: *How to Enable Real Participation*

Vermont Division of Disability and Aging Services

Overview

Vermont Developmental Service State Program Standing Committee members who have developmental disabilities¹ have expressed a strong interest and commitment in their involvement with the standing committee. However, it is difficult for some members to participate in standing committee meetings (and other related meetings) with the current structure. This concern led to the development of a document that outlined some approaches and recommendations for participation by people with developmental disabilities in board meetings. It has been revised to address the participation by people with disabilities in group meetings and organizations of all kinds to the fullest extent possible. It is important to remember the specific type and intensity of supports needed will vary depending on the individual. The following was written with input from members of Green Mountain Self-Advocates (GMSA) and others who are interested in seeing people with disabilities have a full voice in policy and program development for services to people with developmental disabilities.

Key Components to Making Meetings Accessible

- Flexible accommodations that are responsive and specific to each individual.
- Awareness of the balance between the need for accommodations due to a person's disability and the general responsibilities of being a committed member of a group (e.g., advisory or service board, committee, work group).
- Strong commitment of a designated contact person to provide support to each representative with a developmental disability.
- Awareness and commitment of everyone involved with the meeting or organization. Assuring accessible meetings requires a joint effort by all involved.

¹ "Developmental Disability" is defined here according to the VT Developmental Disabilities Act of 1996.

Considerations to Full Participation

- Sufficient peer and advisor support before, during, and after meetings.
- Availability and reliability of transportation to and from meetings.
- Number of representatives with developmental disabilities involved with the organization and/or in attendance; awareness, availability, and interest of a person to get involved at a variety of levels.
- Overall structure of meetings (time, location, duration, content, order of agenda).

Supporting People to Attend Meetings

Representatives with developmental disabilities need to get necessary support before, during and after meetings, including reliable transportation to and from meetings. This support may come from another member of the organization, other attendee, and/or other advisor.

Member Support: When a person first becomes a member of an organization or group that is meeting, there needs to be an initial meeting with him/her to discuss:

1. The role of the committee or group,
2. The role of the person as a member or the group,
3. The role of an advisor (i.e., the person designated to support the person around organization or group issues),
4. What support the person may need to be a participating member, and
5. What the organization or group needs to do to support the person.

Advisor Support: If an advisor is needed, the person may need help choosing the advisor. The advisor may be a regular organization or group member, other attendee, or an existing support person for the individual. The role of the advisor may vary depending on the needs and abilities of the person. The advisor needs to assure the following takes place as needed.

1. **Meet with the person before meetings.** Review previous meeting minutes or documentation and go over the upcoming agenda and materials. Discuss relevant issues or questions he/she may want to bring up at the meeting. The person may want to prepare a statement ahead of time (e.g., written, dictated, recorded). He/she may need some education around how to participate in an organization or group (e.g., taking part in group process, suitable dress and demeanor). Transportation may need to be coordinated. Development of a method to help the person remember the date and time of the next meeting may be helpful.
2. **Attend meetings with the person.** Provide needed information or supports for understanding and participating in discussions and decisions. Help the person understand meeting protocol.

- 3. Follow-up with the person after the meeting to debrief on what took place.** Review the key points of the meeting (e.g., major decisions, next steps). Provide an opportunity for the person to give feedback about the meeting (e.g., how he/she felt the meeting went, what he/she said or wanted to say). Some people find it helpful to do this right after the meeting ends while others may want to go over the meeting when they get together to prepare for the next one.
- 4. Assist the person to connect back with his/her home or other support people.** Ensure links between support networks and good communication of relevant issues (e.g., next meeting dates, follow-up work). Support people may need help learning how best to assist the individual in his/her role as a member of the group. Examples include, discussion of specific issues, reminders of upcoming meetings, assistance with follow-up work, securing transportation to meetings, respecting the person's commitment as a member or the organization or group.

Throughout this whole process, the advisor's role demands great trust and balance in an effort to help the person make informed decisions without the advisor controlling or unduly influencing the person's choices. The advisor needs to find a balance between influence and support, (e.g., help the person understand available options, formulate ideas, clarify statements, keep on track), without imposing his/her own values.

Peer Support: Individuals with disabilities need sufficient peer support during meetings.

- 1. Foster other representatives with developmental disabilities to attend meetings as members, guests or observers.** This will give the person a peer(s) to connect with individually and/or at GMSA meetings about organization or group issues. Focus on recruitment, training and support considerations.
- 2. Allow for substitute representatives with developmental disabilities to the organization or group.** Have the organization or group approve a process similar to that used by other representatives of the group that will allow other people to sit in as a proxy for the designated member. There may also be the need for a more permanent substitution if a specific representative is not able to attend meetings for an extended period of time.

Meeting Structure: The length and content of meetings needs to be adjusted to encourage full participation by all members. The meeting chairperson or facilitator (and other organization or group members) can assist in making the format of the meetings easier for people with disabilities.

During meetings:

- 1. Clearly outline each issue as it comes up for discussion.** Be aware of the pace of the meeting (speed of people talking, movement through the agenda).
- 2. Avoid using jargon and complex terminology.**
- 3. Create time for "Old Business".** Allow an opportunity for people to bring up issues from past meetings. This allows time for the person to have discussed relevant issues with their peers and advisor.

4. **Ask the person if they have anything to say about a specific issue.**
5. **Provide periodic breaks during the meeting.** If a major topic is being discussed, it is especially important to have a short break just before a final decision is made to allow time for the person to discuss the issue with his/her advisor or others.
6. **Reiterate clearly each decision that is made.**

Before or after meetings:

1. **Have a designated organization or group member take responsibility for being a primary contact person for each member with a developmental disability and his/her advisor.**
2. **Write clear and understandable minutes.** Highlight key decisions and next steps. Minutes need to include the next meeting date and a tentative agenda.
3. **Send out the minutes within two weeks after the meeting.** This allows the person to meet with his/her advisor (or others) to discuss the last meeting and prepare for the next one in a timely manner.

It is important to not set a double standard for individuals around their participation. For example, things happen in a person's life that may be of a higher priority than attending a meeting on any given day. This prioritizing of personal and work commitments/interests is something each organization or group members does. A person's choice not to attend a meeting or request for it to be rescheduled due to other priorities needs to be respected. Conversely, it would also be expected for a member to follow-up on his/her responsibilities, such as avoiding extended absences, and notifying the organization or group if he/she cannot attend a meeting or if someone else is attending on her/her behalf.

Alternatives to Attending Meetings

Meeting Alternatives: An individual may find participation in organization or group issues easier when given a choice of meeting options. It is often easier when a person has time to think about what he/she wants to say in a setting other than that of regular meetings.

1. **Have one or two representatives from the organization or group meet with the person separately to discuss key issues.** If the person is a member of the organization or group as a representative of GMSA or local self-advocacy group, arrange for the representatives from the organization or group to go to the advocacy meeting to discuss the specific issue(s).
2. **It is important that representatives with developmental disabilities have the opportunity to choose and/or limit what issues are discussed.**

3. **Organization or group issues need to be discussed in a timely manner.** However, time may not always be available at GMSA or local self-advocacy meetings to discuss current issues. In addition, the timing of GMSA and organization or group meetings in relation to one another may cause delays. Work with the person to find out what adaptations will work best for him/her.
4. **Give reasons for conflicting decisions.** When an organization or group decision does not support a GMSA position, it is the responsibility of the board to explain the reasons for the board's decision to the representative(s) with developmental disabilities and/or GMSA members.
5. **Get input from people about specific issues at times other than during organization or group meetings and GMSA meetings.** This may include separate contacts or meeting venues convenient and comfortable to the person (e.g., in their home, by phone, before or after other meetings the person attends). Arrange for the person's involvement on an ad hoc basis or in smaller work groups around issues of specific interest.

General Questions/Issues to be Addressed

1. What level of commitment to supporting accessibility is the organization or group willing and able to make in terms of financial assistance (e.g., stipends to attend meetings, pay for transportation, pay to advisor)?
2. What will the organization or group as a whole be willing to tolerate in terms of communication accommodations for individuals within the context of regular meetings (e.g., the length of time it takes for a person to get their ideas across or tell their own stories)?
3. What additional education and networking can take place to build supports for people with disabilities (e.g., provide training to self-advocacy groups, support staff, advisors, etc. on how to support and facilitate people with disabilities in group participation and advocacy).
4. What needs to take place to recruit and train individuals and advisors to be involved as organization or group members?
5. How does all this tie into supporting self-advocacy at both local and state levels?

Reference: How to Create Inclusive Boards: A Practical Guide for Board Members. Oregon Developmental Disabilities Council.