



Virtual Advocacy in a Pandemic World: A Guide

INTRODUCTION

As we deal with the consequences of COVID-19, United Spinal's Advocacy and Policy Team hopes you will find the following guide helpful in the coming months as you engage policymakers in virtual one-on-one meetings and in more public forums such as virtual state-wide rolls.

Please know that United Spinal's Advocacy and Policy Team is available to offer advice and provide you all the resources we can to support your federal state and local government efforts. We can assist you in developing survey instruments and putting them into the field because data points can drive policy decisions. We can offer assistance with virtual platforms as well as social media campaigns. Let us know what you need and we will try to help at every turn.

Seize The Moment: As our President and CEO of United Spinal, James Weisman has said, people with disabilities have been working remotely for a very long time. Now practically the rest of the world is trying to catch up with us. While the learning curve has been steep for them, policymakers on all levels of government are quickly adapting to communicate remotely with their individual constituents and organizations, like United Spinal.

While it is true that trillions of dollars to combat the COVID-19 pandemic are coming from Federal policy makers, it is important to note that Federal dollars often flow to the states and local governments. And, more often than not, it is the state and local governments that make the final decision on who gets what, and most importantly, how much. That is even more reason why we must constantly engage state and local elected office holders, agency officials and their staff members.

Now that policymakers are primed to connect with us remotely, let us seize the moment and use our knowhow about remote communications when we reach out to engage policymakers on every level of government, from the U.S. Capitol to local courthouses across the country.

What You Can Do: One huge advantage to remote advocacy is that so many more of us can participate. Only a few wheelchairs can fit in a Congressional office or the local City Council Chamber. But remote platforms allow for many, many wheelchair users to attend and to have their views heard and counted. When it comes to changing policy, the more voices we can raise in support of a policy change, the stronger our position becomes in the eyes of policy makers. As an individual, policymakers highly value your voice, but as part of a United Spinal chorus of voices advocating change, your voice is essential.

Whether you help organize, lend your expertise, tell your story, ask a question, or just participate in a remote event, you will play a very important role in United Spinal's advocacy team. We welcome you, your energy, your enthusiasm, your contributions of time and unique experiences. And we welcome your leadership along with your suggestions, initiatives and ideas.

How This Guide Can Help: This guide can assist you in communicating remotely about issues on both an individual basis as well as a member of a group effort with your local United Spinal Chapter members in meeting on a remote platform with policymakers, especially on your state and local government levels.

This guide is not a strict step by step procedure on how you must advocate. After all, you know your state and local governments best. The types of communication and the forums you chose to participate in are of course up to you. But by using this guide to participate in United Spinal chapter events, by volunteering to help organize forums, such as a virtual roll in your state or for your local county or city government, you can make a significant contribution.

Coordinate for Better Results: Of course, it is essential that you and the Advocacy & Policy Team coordinate efforts. Remember, there is strength in numbers. The Advocacy & Policy Team can help you build participation in your events by helping advertize your event to our members and networks. We can share your successes and challenges with other chapters throughout our network, building upon what you accomplish. Often local initiatives can bloom into to national movements.

PREPARING EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

“You cannot be silent, if you want to be a true American citizen”
Chef José Andrés, July 4, 2020

Determine the Remote Meeting Platform: Our Advocacy & Policy Team has been using Zoom as a remote meeting platform, <http://zoom.us>, however, other platforms are available. Whichever platform you decide to use, it is advisable to consistently use the same platform so that your network colleagues will grow more and more comfortable with its functions and operations. It will make for more efficient and therefore more successful and effective meetings.

One advantage of remote events is the reduced costs associated with them. Time is also an expensive resource and remote meetings save your colleagues as well as policymakers a tremendous amount of time in reduced travel, etc. Remote meetings are also far more flexible than in person meetings in that they can be scheduled quickly and just as quickly be changed. All these points could be stressed in invitations to policymakers in order to urge their participation.

Understand Your Issue(s): Clearly define your or your group's issue and your plan to inform invited policymakers. Your colleagues attending the event should have a clear understanding of the issue they will be discussing and how the policy makers can bring needed change to it.

Develop Talking Points: Plan a remote preparation meeting with your colleagues, even those that may not be able to join your event with policymakers, but who could nevertheless add insight and information on the issue to be discussed. Make notes that explain your issues in simple terms and use them to help draft a clear position statement on your issue. Decide who will discuss which points and how the issue is important to them personally and to your group collectively.

Prepare Materials for Your Event: Use the talking points above and check with the Advocacy & Policy Team for additional resources that could be used to develop a one-page "Issue Paper." It can explain

your chapter's purpose and priorities, outline the issue and why a policy change is needed. Be certain to include contact information for the group, as elected office holders value the ability to keep in touch with constituents on issues in which they are interested. During the event, the issue paper could be presented as a power point presentation. The issue paper should be emailed to policy makers with a thank you email after the event.

Share Your Story: As mentioned above, personal stories about how a certain policy, or the lack of a needed policy, can have a great impact on policymakers. In a remote event, it is advisable to have at least one or two individuals describe in very personal terms how a government policy or needed one is impacting their lives. As discussed below, what format you decide to use can have even a greater impact.

For instance, if you included a video clip of a person who could not get to work Independently because the lack of one curb cut prevented their wheelchair from entering a building, the visual of the wheelchair user at the curb corner with the workplace visible in the background would speak volumes. A picture is worth a thousand words.

"Personal stories have the power to move people from apathy to empathy to action."
John Capecci and Timothy Cage.

Create a Remote Event Speaker Schedule and Budget Time: Early on, your planning team must budget how much time each speaker and video clips will have during the event. Designate an event facilitator who can moderate the event and keep the event on time, reminding speakers of time constraints if they are running beyond their allotted time. Plan the event so there is some logical progression to it, for example, define the issue, possible solutions and then hear the policymaker address their position on the issue and their proposed action on it, followed by Q&As.

This information and schedule should be shared with policymakers when they are invited. Be sure to let policymakers also know if they will be expected to answer participants' questions. How will the Q&A be moderated, etc.

Schedule Visits: Once you have identified policymakers you would like to meet with, it's time to schedule 'visits'. You should be prepared to schedule your event around their schedules as they will be very limited in when and for how long they can participate in your event. You can schedule them by calling and or emailing the policymakers or contacting the staffers in charge of scheduling. Once you have a date set for your event, start scheduling time slots in your event as soon as possible.

Follow-up: A thank you note, the issue paper and any other information you agreed to provide should be sent soon after your event. This provides an opportunity to follow-up with your policy change request in writing. It's a nice gesture to send a thank you letter or email to the scheduler expressing your appreciation.

TACTICS FOR A SUCCESSFUL REMOTE ADVOCACY EVENT

In addition to effective communication, there are remote tactics you can also employ to help publicize your issue, your events and policymakers' support for your issue.

Virtual Advocacy Team Office Hours: Your remote platform can be used for smaller meetings to strategize, plan and report on various planning points. Your colleagues could meet to discuss policymaker logistics and issues: whether they accepted the invitation to speak and their response about your issue. You could open advocacy office hours to your full membership to receive additional input and to encourage more participation in your event.

You could include a ‘virtual reception’ where everyone can join online to celebrate after the conclusion of your event. Perhaps have a short debrief at the beginning while the event is still fresh in everyone’s mind. Please have someone taking notes.

Letters to the Editor: Letters to the editor, of local newspapers; a public service announcement on local television stations; comments on a popular blog, all of these provide excellent opportunities for your colleagues to advance pre-agreed upon positions. As always, providing talking points and training to assist letter writers in making the best case for your cause are useful.

Social Media Advocacy Challenge: With inspiration from the ALS Association’s Ice Bucket Challenge, try issuing an advocacy challenge to your supporters – perhaps having them announce their participation in your effort by posting a branded photo or image to share with their networks on social media. As part of the challenge, provide a hashtag and ask them to tag three others who they think should also participate.

Branding Social Media Profile Pictures and GIPHY Stickers: Request your colleagues change their social media profile pictures to correspond to your next event a week or two in advance. They could also create custom GIPHY stickers for use on Instagram or Snapchat stories. It makes the visual branding of social media stories easy. These visual assets can also then be repurposed beyond the event to further support your issue.

Online Resource Hubs: United Spinal’s online resources and [Advocacy in Action Toolkit](#) provide a one-stop-shop for you and your colleagues. We would be most interested in also including your sample social media messages, talking points, scripts for meeting requests, media releases, web stickers/graphics, videos, etc., which will complement our national messaging. Virtual meetings, state rolls and other public events you have recorded online are also of interest to us in preserving.

360-Degree Videos: As mentioned previously, a video can be an important component in showcasing an issue, a 360-degree video can help put virtual visitors in the middle of the action. Even a standard video or photos can help provide policymakers with much-needed context. Consider sending a portion of the clip or a couple of photos with your initial invitation to policymakers to highlight your mission. A 360-Degree video could visually demonstrate various adverse dimensions of an issue, and you might also include a comparative 360 video in which a requested solution has proven itself in another locale.

Letter Desking: Previously, we discussed the central importance of personal stories but some of your colleagues, for one reason or the other, may be hesitant to participate. Letter desking is similar to a phone canvass where select supporters answer questions in a short interview to flesh-out the best elements of their personal story. This story is combined with pre-written talking points and then sent back to your colleague for approval. If they like the finished product, they could record it or present it live at the event. It could also be sent to policymakers.

Video Testimonials: Capturing video testimonials that share how issues affect their personal lives or how they view an issue from advocates, your fellow members and colleagues and policy makers is important in advancing any issue policy change. These can be gleaned from your event or prepared beforehand as we discussed previously. Look for opportunities to share them on social media and in emails, newsletters, thank yous, related issue advocacy and other outlets. Be certain to obtain written permission for the specific purpose you will be using the testimonials.

Acknowledgements & Further Resources*

- United Spinal's [Advocacy in Action Toolkit](#).
 - The Advocacy & Policy Team strongly advises that you review the Toolkit before you begin planning an advocacy event.
- [Virtual Advocacy Series](#) - Examples of how you and your colleagues could structure an event to engage policymakers is the ongoing Virtual Advocacy Series our Washington, D.C., based Advocacy & Policy Team has been conducting. Links to review the sessions are available at: <https://unitedspinal.org/virtual-advocacy-series/>

**Some of the tactics listed above were adopted for this guide from [Grassroots Professional Network](#) LinkedIn page and presented by [the Beekeeper Group](#).*

In a gentle way, you can shake the world - Mahatma Gandhi

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has. – Margaret Mead