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## **NEWS FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

March 20, 2020

### **Office of Open Government Advisory: Additional Information Regarding Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) and Open Meetings**

MADISON, Wis. – The Wisconsin Department of Justice’s (DOJ) Office of Open Government (OOG) continues to prepare additional information in response to inquiries as to the applicability of the Wisconsin’s open meetings law, Wis. Stat. §§ 19.81 to 19.98, in light of current public health concerns regarding COVID-19. This advisory is provided pursuant to Wis. Stat. § 19.98.

Conducting open meetings remotely can pose a number of technological and practical issues that governmental bodies should consider in advance, including, among other things, the following:

- Governmental bodies must ensure that they follow the notice requirements of Wis. Stat. § 19.84 and such notice should inform the public that the meeting will be held remotely and provide all information necessary for the public to monitor the meeting.
- Notices should provide instructions for how the public may access the remote meeting, whether it is to be held via telephone conference call or video conference call. This includes providing the telephone number, video conference link, and any necessary passcodes or other login information.
- As DOJ’s Office of Open Government advised in its March 17, 2020 [advisory](#), a governmental body conducting a meeting remotely should be mindful of the possibility that it may be particularly burdensome or even infeasible for one or more individuals who would like to observe a meeting to do so remotely—for example, for people without telephone or internet access or who are deaf or

hard of hearing—and appropriate accommodations should be made to facilitate reasonable access to the meeting for such individuals.

- When conducting a videoconference or internet-based meeting, the governmental body should strongly consider providing the public with an alternative telephone dial-in option for observing such a meeting so that lack of internet access is not a barrier to observing the meeting.
- At the beginning of each meeting conducted remotely, the chair of the governmental body should encourage all body members to identify themselves before they begin speaking and not to speak over one another. This will help all those listening to the meeting better understand who is speaking.
- When possible, a governmental body may wish to consider recording the meeting and posting it on its website as soon as practicable after the meeting concludes.
- As a bottom line, governmental bodies meeting remotely can and should consider steps that ensure that their meetings remain open and accessible to the public.

If you have questions or concerns regarding the application of the open meetings law, please contact the Office of Open Government at (608) 267-2220.

See also:

March 17, 2020 – [Office of Open Government Advisory: Coronavirus Disease 2019 \(COVID-19\) and Open Meetings](#)

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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

March 16, 2020

**Office of Open Government Advisory:  
Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) and Open Meetings**

MADISON, Wis. – The Wisconsin Department of Justice’s (DOJ) Office of Open Government (OOG) has prepared the following advisory in response to inquiries as to the applicability of the Wisconsin’s open meetings law, Wis. Stat. §§ 19.81 to 19.98, in light of current public health concerns regarding COVID-19. This advisory is provided pursuant to Wis. Stat. § 19.98.

As explained below, governmental bodies typically can meet their open meetings obligations, while practicing social distancing to help protect public health, by conducting meetings via telephone conference calls if the public is provided with an effective way to monitor such calls (such as public distribution, at least 24 hours in advance, of dial-in information for a conference call).

The open meetings law states: “[I]t is declared to be the policy of this state that the public is entitled to the fullest and most complete information regarding the affairs of government as is compatible with the conduct of governmental business.” Wis. Stat. § 19.81(1). To that end, the law requires that “all meetings of all state and local governmental bodies shall be publicly held in places reasonably accessible to members of the public and shall be open to all citizens at all times unless otherwise expressly provided by law.” Wis. Stat. § 19.81(2). A meeting must be preceded by notice providing the time, date, place, and subject matter of the meeting, generally, at least 24 hours before it begins. Wis. Stat. § 19.84.

The open meetings law “does not require that all meetings be held in publicly owned places but rather in places ‘reasonably accessible to members of the public.’” 69 Op. Att’y Gen. 143, 144 (1980) (quoting 47 Op. Att’y Gen. 126 (1978)). As such, DOJ’s longstanding advice is that a telephone conference call can be an acceptable method of convening a meeting of a governmental body. *Id.* at 146. More recently, DOJ guidance deemed video conference calls acceptable as well. Wis. Dep’t of Justice,

*Wisconsin Open Meetings Law Compliance Guide* 11 (May 2019), <https://www.doj.state.wi.us/sites/default/files/office-open-government/Resources/OML-GUIDE.pdf>.

When an open meeting is held by teleconference or video conference, the public must have a means of monitoring the meeting. DOJ concludes that, under the present circumstances, a governmental body will typically be able to meet this obligation by providing the public with information (in accordance with notice requirements) for joining the meeting remotely, even if there is no central location at which the public can convene for the meeting. A governmental body conducting a meeting remotely should be mindful of the possibility that it may be particularly burdensome or even infeasible for one or more individuals who would like to observe a meeting to do so remotely—for example, for people without telephone or internet access or who are deaf or hard of hearing—and appropriate accommodations should be made to facilitate reasonable access to the meeting for such individuals.

To be clear, providing only remote access to an open meeting is not always permissible, as past DOJ guidance shows. Where a complex plan, drawing, or chart is needed for display or the demeanor of a witness is significant, a meeting held by telephone conference likely would not be “reasonably accessible” to the public because important aspects of the discussion or deliberation would not be communicated to the public. *See* 69 Op. Att’y Gen. at 145. Further, the type of access that constitutes reasonable access in the present circumstances, in which health officials are encouraging social distancing (including avoiding large public gatherings) in order to mitigate the impact of COVID-19, may be different from the type of access required in other circumstances. Ultimately, whether a meeting is “reasonably accessible” is a factual question that must be determined on a case-by-case basis. *Id.*

If you have questions or concerns regarding the application of the open meetings law, please contact the Office of Open Government at (608) 267-2220.