

JOINT SUBCOMMITTEE TO STUDY

SENATOR SCOTT SUROVELL
CO-CHAIR



DELEGATE CANDI MUNDON KING
CO-CHAIR

PANDEMIC RESPONSE AND PREPAREDNESS

February 19, 2025

The Honorable Marcus B. Simon, Chair
Virginia Freedom of Information Advisory Council
General Assembly Building
201 North 9th Street, 4th Floor
Richmond, VA 23219

Dear Delegate Simon,

Senate Joint Resolution 10 (2022) established the Joint Subcommittee to Study Pandemic Response and Preparedness in the Commonwealth to assess and evaluate the Commonwealth's overall pandemic preparedness and response capabilities. To assist in carrying out this charge, the Joint Subcommittee hired Tidal Basin Government Consulting to conduct independent research, review the performance of existing laws in relation to the pandemic response, and recommend corrective actions. The consultant developed an after action report (AAR) using multiple sources of information, including (i) surveys and interviews with individuals engaged with the state's response between 2020 and 2023, (ii) public survey responses from across the state, and (iii) review of documents from the response period. From this work, the consultant developed several observations and recommendations for consideration by the Joint Subcommittee.

After review of the final AAR, the Joint Subcommittee would like to refer the following observations and recommendations to the Broadband Advisory Council for review and possible action:

Observation 10.2: The implementation of technology to facilitate social distancing resulted in certain challenges and **Recommendation 10.2.3:** Establishment consistent protocols for remote voting and decision-making.

Attached you will find a copy of the final AAR along with a breakout document focusing on the observations and recommendations that the Joint Subcommittee would like the Council to review. If you have any questions regarding this referral, please contact Amigo Wade, Director, Division of Legislative Services, at awade@dls.virginia.gov or at (804) 698-1862. We ask that any

responses or comments be submitted to Lauren Waller, Program Administrator with the Division, at lwaller@dls.virginia.gov by November 1, 2025.

We thank the Council in advance for its attention to this matter.



Senator Scott A. Surovell, Co-Chair



Delegate Candi Mundon King, Co-Chair

After Action Report Breakout (Freedom of Information Advisory Council Referral)



Technology

The Technology focus area encompasses critical technology topics such as the use of data analytics and modeling to inform decision-making and resource allocation. It also explores improvements in leveraging data for future public health purposes, ensuring more effective responses. Additionally, it addresses the scalability, sustainability, and resilience of the technology infrastructure used in public health emergencies.

Strengths

Technology was leveraged to provide data and data analytics that supported informed decision-making.

Data was collected across state agencies and key external partners to inform decision-makers on the ongoing impact of the pandemic across the Commonwealth. A significant strength of the Commonwealth's COVID-19 response was the effective use of technology to collect and analyze the data that supported informed decision-making. By leveraging advanced technological tools such as the modeling program from the University of Virginia, decision-makers were able to access real-time information, track trends, and forecast outcomes from Virginia and across the country, enabling more accurate and timely interventions. This strategic use of data not only enhanced the ability to respond to the evolving situation but also helped to allocate resources more efficiently and prioritize actions based on evidence, ultimately contributing to a more effective and coordinated public health response.

Employing technology enabled agencies and organizations to maintain operational continuity while adhering to social distancing measures.

A notable strength of the Commonwealth's COVID-19 response was the successful use of technology to enable educational facilities, state agencies, and key organizations to maintain operational continuity while adhering to social distancing measures. By adopting digital tools for remote work, virtual meetings, and online collaboration, entities were able to continue essential functions without compromising public health. This technological adaptability not only ensured the ongoing delivery of services but also demonstrated resilience and innovation in overcoming the challenges posed by the pandemic. Highlighted examples include local school divisions developing innovative solutions to facilitate student learning, health and human services agencies with client requiring face-to-face interventions, and the use of remote hearings and proceedings for the judicial system.

The transition to virtual communications and coordination yielded numerous benefits that can continue to make positive contributions beyond the pandemic.

Teleconferencing, virtual conferencing/meeting platforms, and other remote collaboration tools have led to significant efficiencies and cost savings, while enabling broader reach and more inclusive access to services and public engagement. Multiple interviewees highlighted the use of technology allowed for greater transparency and engagement for many state agencies' services. For example, the shift from

in-person to virtual school (for schooling, events, and meetings) allowed more families and caretakers to participate, fostering greater involvement in students' activities. Additionally, these virtual platforms have enhanced inclusivity for persons with disabilities, making it easier for them to engage with various services and events. These positive outcomes demonstrate the lasting value of virtual communication technologies in enhancing accessibility, efficiency, and community involvement.

Areas for Improvement

Observation 10.2: The implementation of technology to facilitate social distancing resulted in certain challenges.

To maintain continuity of services during periods of social distancing for health and safety, technology was utilized extensively. Although this approach proved beneficial, it also presented challenges for sectors such as education, the judicial system, and regulatory boards.

Instructional staff faced a steep learning curve due to a lack of prior experience in delivering instruction in this format. Student engagement proved challenging, particularly because students were not physically present during instruction. Meeting instructional objectives, especially in early literacy, presented significant difficulties.

Remote voting for regulatory boards and other elected boards during the COVID-19 pandemic contributed to a sense of distrust among stakeholders. The shift from traditional in-person voting to virtual platforms raised concerns about transparency, security, and the integrity of the decision-making process, despite measures taken to ensure accountability such as requiring members to be on camera and not allowing proxy voting.

Recommendations

- 10.2.3 Establish consistent protocols for remote voting and decision-making.** Develop and comprehensive protocols for remote voting and decision-making processes for public-facing boards and other elected bodies to enhance transparency and trust. These protocols should include secure and verifiable systems for remote voting, clear guidelines for ensuring integrity, and mechanisms for stakeholder oversight to address concerns about transparency and security during virtual meetings and decision-making.