



June 22, 2021

Submitted via email to foiacouncil@dls.virginia.gov

Dear Members of the FOIA Council, Electronic Meetings Subcommittee:

On November 12, 2020, on behalf of the American Association of University Women of Virginia (AAUW of Virginia), we submitted a letter to the FOIA Council, Electronic Meetings Subcommittee, applauding our state government's quick embrace of electronic meetings during the COVID-19 declared emergency. This action has increased participation by members of the public and ensured continuity of government business in a transparent manner. We concluded our previous letter by urging that the state government's recognition of the advantages of electronic public meetings should not end when the pandemic emergency ends.

In advance of the Subcommittee's June 24, 2021, meeting, we are again writing to express AAUW of Virginia's strong support for changing Virginia law to permit additional flexibility for holding electronic meetings even when there is not a declaration of emergency. As one of 1000 branches nationwide of the American Association of University Women—a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization founded in 1881—our mission is to advance gender equity for women and girls through research, education, and advocacy, and our vision embraces equity for all. We currently represent over a thousand members in 24 branches in all regions of the Commonwealth.

The work of AAUW builds upon responsible public participation at the local, state, national, and international levels. We advocate public discussion to ensure enlightened decisions on matters of public import. We work to increase the number of women and other underrepresented populations in policy- and other decision-making positions and strive for our work to be inclusive and intersectional, collaborating with diverse allies and coalitions to achieve equity for all.

We believe that Virginia law pertaining to electronic meetings is antiquated and ignores the life circumstances and experiences found in the diverse population, limits citizen participation to the privileged few, and adversely impacts participation by women and other underrepresented populations. There are many reasons that make it difficult for members of the public to attend meetings in-person and these should be qualifying for electronic participation. Women particularly are adversely impacted because they often must balance the demands of work, both inside and outside of the home, with caring for children and aging parents. Many people have to travel as a requirement of their job. Others have lengthy daily commutes to and from their jobs and often rely on public transportation. Still others work schedules that conflict with scheduled

public meetings. Virginia needs to follow the model established by other states and allow public bodies to meet electronically outside of an emergency.

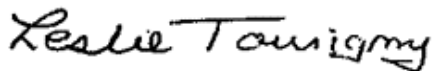
The past 15 months have challenged us all in ways we could have never imagined. However, we have learned how to conduct the business of our lives in novel ways—especially adapting to meeting electronically, and in doing so, have furthered democratic participation. For example, AAUW of Virginia engages with government officials at all levels to advance our public policy priorities. Through electronic meetings we have been able to continue our interactions and information exchange during the COVID emergency, and by breaking down attendance barriers have seen greater participation rates in our electronic meetings than during previous in-person meetings.

Thank you very much for your consideration of AAUW of Virginia’s recommendation to provide more flexibility for electronic meetings of public bodies outside of a declared emergency.

Sincerely,



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