

From: **Lucy Beadnell** <lucy.beadnell@thearcofnova.org>
Date: Tue, Aug 24, 2021 at 10:55 AM
Subject: Public Comment for August 26th Meeting
To: <foiacouncil@dls.virginia.gov>

FOIA Council,

Thank you so much for your important work on informational access for all. I am submitting a public comment today related to the agenda the Council will hear on August 26, 2021 in regard to the Subcommittee's studying of electronic meeting options for public bodies with appointed members.

The Arc of Northern Virginia is a non-profit that has been around for more than 60 years to meet the needs of people with developmental disabilities and their loved ones. We are part of a nationwide network of Arc chapters, including nearly two dozen inside of Virginia. One of the core functions of our work is listening to concerns or challenges people with disabilities are facing and giving free assistance to help them navigate those challenges. As you can imagine, it is busy work and was busier than ever during the pandemic.

Though people with disabilities were at a greater disadvantage than many during the pandemic (e.g., more likely to die from COVID, more likely to lose paid employment, etc.), there was a significant bright spot and that was the ability to remotely participate in activities that include state and local government meetings, public testimony, General Assembly committees, advisory boards, and other public forums.

The disability community has historically and consistently been disenfranchised from participating in these opportunities to be a part of government and give feedback and comments to boards and elected officials. Very many of the individuals we serve have behavioral or medical complexities that make sitting still and quietly in a room for long periods of time to then give only a short comment absolutely impossible. Many more rely on parents or caregivers to transport them, or even get them out of bed. For perspective, when I am working with someone who needs accessible transport to Richmond, unless they can find a caregiver willing to offer that ride for free, the best I can suggest is a \$4/mile accessible transport service, making a trip to and from Richmond roughly \$800.

By comparison, during the pandemic, we saw opportunities for people to sign up to speak at public events in advance and be given a rough time on when they could join the meeting online. They could turn off their camera or microphone when needed. They didn't need to rely on a caregiver or specialized transport to attend meetings of their government and the results were life changing and empowering. Similar stories came from parents, siblings, and paid caregivers who were historically not able to join in on meetings or offer testimony because of their need to

provide care to someone with a disability who couldn't go with them. The doors to open democratic participation were open to them for the first time as well.

If you want real transparency in government, allow people to attend who are not able to afford expensive private transport, or to take a whole day off from work to speak for 3 minutes. Allow the disability community to be a fully part of our open government by allowing continuing virtual participation options. We've seen this is a need for the disability community, but a greater benefit to all.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I am happy to provide further information at any time.

Stay Well,

Lucy Beadnell on behalf of The Arc of Northern Virginia

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