

Protocol & Information for Committee Hearing for Witnesses - Draft

Draft: August 2022

The legislative process relies greatly on the testimony, expertise and experiences shared by witnesses in committee hearings. Vermonters (you) are a critical part of the legislative process. The legislature welcomes and appreciates you taking the time to testify. Our policy-making decisions better support Vermonters as a result of your engagement.

The legislature is committed to creating safe and inclusive spaces for people to testify. A safe space means holding hearings where people may share their personal experiences and position on policy without being questioned or challenged in an aggressive manner. We can disagree on policy, but we should not question or challenge someone's experience. Safety is a commitment by the legislature to provide open and meaningful ways for all Vermonters to engage with the democratic process. This includes witnesses, members of the legislature and staff. However, comfort is different from safety. There may be times when testimony provided causes personal discomfort. In these cases, individuals are encouraged to discern the difference between safety and discomfort or unease.

An inclusive space means inviting people with different identities, backgrounds and experiences to participate in hearings and creating a respectful, tolerant space by all people present, including legislators.

About Legislative Committees

- Each legislative committee in the House is led by legislators in the roles of Chair, Vice-Chair and Ranking Member (most senior member).
- Committee membership size varies, but generally every committee is made up of legislators from around the state and from different political affiliations.
- Every committee is assigned one professional staff assistant who supports the committee.
- The committee assistant is generally the person who reaches out to you to invite you to testify.
- Committee contact information is available on the legislature's website on each committee page and in the email they used to confirm your testimony date and time.
- Bills are drafted by legislators in the months leading up to a biennium and into the first part of each session. The legislature is working to use an equity framework to better understand the purpose, impact, and intended (and unintended) outcomes of legislation. You can find the equity framework [here](#).
- Legislative leaders and all members of the House and Senate receive annual professional learning designed to better understand individual bias, systemic inequities and discrimination.

Preparing to Testify

Your invitation is to speak to a legislative committee, in a committee meeting where you will speak to the members of that committee along with other witnesses. The amount of time offered to each witness varies depending on the committee's schedule, number of other witnesses scheduled and other activities. While committees strive to give witnesses adequate time to speak and run on time, sometimes unexpected schedule changes limit time for testimony and/or cause delays in meeting times. Committee chairs and assistants will do their best to communicate these changes in a timely manner.

- Committee [agendas](https://legislature.vermont.gov/) are posted weekly at <https://legislature.vermont.gov/>.

- Committee members, documents and prior testimony on the bill or topic you are testifying on can be found on [committee pages](#). You can also find the original version of a bill and information on the status of the bill by searching the bill number or keyword on the legislative [website](#).
- Witnesses are allowed to offer remarks in various ways: verbal remarks, speaking from written documents, or sharing visuals. The documents you provide will be shared with committee members and posted for the public record on the committee's website. If possible, you are asked to submit written testimony 24 hours in advance of your appearance before the committee.
- We also invite you to share how to properly pronounce your name so the person running the committee hearing can accurately introduce you to the committee. Please also share your pronouns, if desired.
- When you begin your remarks, we ask you to introduce yourself for the record (your name and town and/or professional title or organizational affiliation if that applies to your testimony).
- If you have a family or work relationship with anyone on the committee, you should mention it (for example, "In full disclosure I work with Rep. [name's] partner.>").
- When beginning your testimony it is customary, but not required, to acknowledge the committee with a general statement of "good morning/afternoon Chair [X] and members of the [XYZ] Committee."

Information for Testifying In-Person and Navigating the Statehouse

- Directions, transportation options, parking when traveling to the statehouse can be found [HERE](#).
- Bathrooms, accessible entrances can be found [HERE](#).
- Information on accessibility and accommodation requests can be found by contacting Mike Ferrant, Director of Legislative Operations at 802-828-2271 or mferrant@leg.state.vt.us.
<https://legislature.vermont.gov/staff-and-offices/staff-offices/legislative-operations/>.
- Committees have assigned rooms in the Statehouse. The Sergeant-at-Arms is located in the main lobby of the building and can help direct you to the correct room.
- When the committee is meeting fully in-person, witnesses are welcome to enter the committee room at any time and asked to sit alongside the edge of the room.
- You are encouraged to arrive at least 10 minutes ahead of the beginning of the hearing.
- In the committee room, you will find a chair along the side. When it is your turn, you will be invited to share your testimony.

- A committee usually follows the order of witnesses as listed on the committee agenda. You can request to speak at a different time by notifying the chair if you need to request a certain timeframe to speak.

Information for Online Testimony

When the committee is meeting virtually or in a hybrid setting, witnesses may participate via Zoom which is live streamed on YouTube and archived afterward on the committee website.

- You may connect via Zoom with a desktop computer, laptop, tablet or cell phone. If you're using a cell phone, be prepared to not be able to see everyone in the meeting given limitations of the Zoom app on phones. If using your cell phone to connect to the hearing, email the Committee Assistant the last 4 digits of the number so that the assistant may admit you to the meeting. They will need this number to admit you to the meeting.
- Please sign into the Zoom meeting 10 minutes before your scheduled testimony.
- Only people who have been invited to the hearing will be admitted.
- We recognize you by your device name; if your device shows up as "iPad 2", we will not know who you are. Please name your device prior to the meeting.
- Please mute yourself and turn off your video until it is time for your testimony.
- If you are calling in on your phone, rather than using the Zoom software, you should use *6 to mute or unmute yourself, and *9 to raise your hand.
- Remember that anything you are doing/saying is being viewed and heard by the Committee and anyone who is watching on YouTube. Hearings are also recorded.
- If you need further instructions, let the Committee Assistant know.

Information about Dialogue with the Committee

Committee members may ask questions and engage in a back and forth with witnesses after the witness provides initial comments. The chair or vice chair leads the meeting and calls on members to ask questions, and is also charged with maintaining decorum and safety of all participants in the meeting.

Accessibility Information

Interpretative Services: If you or another witness requires interpreter services or accommodations for auditory or physical accessibility to attend a meeting, please contact Mike Ferrant, Director of Legislative Operations at 802-828-2271 or mferrant@leg.state.vt.us. <https://legislature.vermont.gov/staff-and-offices/staff-offices/legislative-operations/>. Please note, there is an expense related to offering interpretative services so offering these services on a routine basis is limited at this time.

Accommodations: If you require physical accommodations, please contact Mike Ferrant, Director of Legislative Operations at 802-828-2271 or mferrant@leg.state.vt.us or the Sargent of Arms, Janet Miller at 802-828-2228 or jmiller@leg.state.vt.us. Another resource is [Green](#)

[Mountain Self Advocates](#), a disability rights organization with resources on how to self-advocate.

Communication Resources: Readable.com is a free website to assist people with written communications to use concise and accessible language for people of all literacy and language skills.

Resources to Use When Hearing is Not Safe and Inclusive

We are committed to making committee hearings and legislative engagement a safe and inclusive experience for members of the public. The legislature acknowledges our existing resources are limited at this time to fully address harmful incidents. However, we do have some resources available to the public and encourage you to use them if you experience an interaction that is not safe or harmful.

Speaker of the House's Office at 802-828-2245, if it occurred in the House.

Senate Pro Tempore's Office at 802-828-3806, if it occurred in the Senate.

House Discrimination Prevention Panel: The House Discrimination Prevention Panel receives and investigates complaints of alleged discrimination involving members of the House and legislative staff working in the House. The Panel also adopts and updates the House Policy for the Prevention of Discrimination and provides education, training and forums for members and staff to understand issues of discrimination. For more information: <https://legislature.vermont.gov/committee/detail/2022/346>.

The Senate does not have a comparable discrimination prevention panel at this time.

Human Rights Commission: The Commission protects people from unlawful discrimination in public accommodations and provides information and referrals to individuals.
<https://hrc.vermont.gov/>

Sargent of Arms: This office is responsible for the functional operations of the legislature, including meeting room access, communicating with legislators and operating the Capitol Police Department. <https://legislature.vermont.gov/staff-and-offices/staff-offices/sergeant-at-arms/>

General Assembly Human Resources Office: This office provides solutions in a nonpartisan and confidential way to promote a fair and positive work environment in the legislature.
<https://legislature.vermont.gov/staff-and-offices/staff-offices/human-resources/>

Witness Preparation Checklist

- Arrive at the committee room or sign into the Zoom committee room 10 minutes before you are scheduled to testify.
- Watch for updates from the committee assistant on changes to the agenda and amount of time you may have to testify due to unexpected schedule changes during the day.

- Review the agenda and any relevant information on the bill you will be addressing ahead of time. Committee [agendas](#) are posted weekly at <https://legislature.vermont.gov/>. Relevant testimony and documents on bills in committees can be found on the [committee pages](#).
- Prepare written remarks or visuals to help document your testimony (optional). Submit written testimony to the committee assistant 24 hours in advance of your appearance.
- If you are virtually testifying, name your Zoom name before signing into the meeting (via computer or tablet). If you are calling in to testify, email the Committee Assistant the last 4 digits of the number so that the assistant may admit you to the meeting.
- Share the proper pronunciation of your name to the committee assistant and/or chair (optional). Share your pronouns (optional).
- Introduce yourself your name and town and/or professional title or organizational affiliation if that applies to your testimony) when you begin your remarks.
- Mention if you have a family or work relationship with anyone on the committee, (for example, "In full disclosure I work with Rep. [name's] partner.").
- Acknowledge the committee with a general statement of "good morning/afternoon Chair [X] and members of the [XYZ] Committee" (optional).
- Mute yourself and turn off your video until it is time for your testimony.
- If you are calling in on your phone, rather than using the Zoom software, use *6 to mute or unmute yourself, and *9 to raise or lower your hand.

Committee Leadership and Members Protocol for Welcoming and Supporting Witnesses in Committee - Draft

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The General Assembly deliberative process relies greatly on the testimony, expertise and experiences shared by witnesses in committee hearings. We are committed to creating an inclusive and welcoming environment for witnesses because Vermonters deserve a democratic space that acknowledges and values their knowledge, expertise and lived experiences.

Each committee will offer the following committee process when inviting, welcoming and engaging with witnesses:

- Share the witness protocol document at least 48 hours before a witness is asked to testify in committee so witnesses can prepare.
- Communicate with witnesses as soon as possible for any schedule changes, including if testimony time will be limited.
- Confirm the correct pronunciation of witnesses names and pronouns. If someone's name is mispronounced, pause, apologize and correct it. If someone uses another person's wrong pronouns, pause, apologize and use the correct pronouns.
- Speak clearly and plainly, and encourage all committee members to do the same, to allow for language accessibility and ease in understanding the legislative process. Clear language is particularly important for people who require an interpreter and/or people requiring auditory assistance. However, clear and transparent communication and explanations benefits everyone.
- Welcome all witnesses, especially witnesses who are new to testifying in the Statehouse.
- The committee chair and/or committee leadership will maintain a welcoming and safe space during hearings, including stopping aggressive lines of questioning from committee members which challenge or question someone's experience or story. Leaders will stop interruptions. Leaders will also remind witnesses they are allowed to answer questions or not, especially as it relates to personal information and experiences.

If harmful questions are posed in the hearing, committee leaders will pause the conversation and clarify what is legally allowed to be asked of a witness, committee member or staff. For guidance on legally allowable questions, please contact Legislative Counsel.

Whenever possible, committee leaders will acknowledge when harm has been done and apologize for harm caused to a witness during the meeting, or at minimum, immediately after the meeting.

If committee leaders do not maintain a safe and welcoming space or miss pausing harmful conversations, members of the committee are encouraged to ask to be acknowledged to ask for a pause in the hearing to address matters.