Public Hearings during the pandemic: what you need to know

As committed advocates, even a pandemic won’t stop us from making our voices heard on the issues that matter to our communities right now.

While the legislature is in person in Augusta, most public events, like hearings, are still virtual. As advocates, we must still find creative ways to educate legislators about bills that will have big impacts on the lives of low-income people in Maine.

If you would like to participate in a public hearing of the Maine legislature’s “short session” in 2022, we hope this information will help.

The legislative session will likely run from January to the end of April. The Legislature holds public hearings on different legislation during the session.

What is a public hearing?

- A legislative public hearing is a step in the process of a bill becoming a law. Legislative committees are a small group of Maine Senators and Representatives who listen to testimony from both sides of the issue at the public hearing.

Our goals at a public hearing:

- To persuade the legislative committee to vote in favor of a bill that will have a positive impact or against a bill that will have a harmful impact.
- To make the case for urgent issues like health care, racial equity, Tribal Sovereignty, affordable housing and tenant protections, legal aid access and trauma-informed support for low-income families.
- To ensure racial and economic justice is considered by committee members and prioritized when they make their decision about a bill.
- To counter opponents' arguments against our legislative effort
- Many public hearings are covered in the media, so this is also a chance to get our message out to the wider public.
Here are the steps to participating in a public hearing in 2022:

**Step 1: Know your bill:** Work with Maine Equal Justice to identify the Legislative Document number (LD#) for the bill you want to follow this legislative session. You can check the Maine Equal Justice legislative agenda for brief descriptions of our priorities. Click here for a full list of bill titles.

Here is the weekly legislative reports, which indicate the bills that are printed each week.

**Step 2: Find out when the public hearing is being held and how to register as a participant:**

Once a bill has been printed, you can use its “LD” number to look up its status, including whether it has been scheduled for a public hearing here: http://legislature.maine.gov/LawMakerWeb/search.asp

Upcoming public hearings and work sessions: https://legislature.maine.gov/bills/phwkSched.html

There are two ways to register for a public hearing:

- You can go to the Testimony Submission page to sign up to testify. You will need to know which committee is holding the hearing, the date of the hearing, and the LD#. Click the boxes that say “I would like to submit my testimony live” and “Submit/Register”. Then the committee clerk will send you a link to join the hearing on Zoom or by phone.
  - You need to register at least 30 minutes before the hearing begins.
  - You can also upload written testimony when you register or you can do that later.

- You can email the committee clerk directly to get the link to register for the public hearing. Their contact info can be found on their committee page: http://legislature.maine.gov/committee/#Committees.

Please reach out to Kate Brennan at Maine Equal Justice if you are having trouble finding the information you need.

**Step 3: Who should join a public hearing?** The public is welcome! Help us spread the word about the public hearing to others who care. People whose lives are directly affected by the bill are the most important voices legislators can hear from. It is also important to have family members of those who are impacted weigh in, as well as advocates and allies to help define the problem and solutions needed.

**Step 4: Prepare for the hearing:**

Learn about the committee that will hear the testimony.
It can help to research which legislators are on the committee ahead of time, which districts they represent and what, if anything, we know about them and what they care about. This can help you make a connection with them in your testimony. Going into a public hearing with an understanding of your audience can be helpful to your cause.

**Step 5: Testify at the hearing**

*How to join:*

On the day of the hearing, you will join the webinar as an attendee (with your camera and microphone off). When it is time for you to deliver your testimony, you will be "promoted" by the committee staff who are running the Zoom to a panelist. This can sometimes take 20 seconds or even a minute and you will not be able to hear the committee while you are being made a panelist. As a panelist, you will have the ability to turn on your camera and microphone so that you can deliver your testimony. If you have any problems with this process, you can reach out to the committee clerk for help.

The Committee Chairs will start the hearing by introducing the Committee. Legislators who sponsor the bill testify first and they do not have a time limit. Then the public will be invited to testify, often starting with those in support and then those against.

At the hearing, you don’t need to read exactly what you write. You will have 3 minutes to speak, but there is no limit on the length of written testimony that you submit. Testimony from the public tends to be one to two pages long. One of the chairs of the committee will watch the time and will ask you to wrap up if you take longer than 3 minutes. You may want to practice reading your testimony out loud and see how long it takes so you know what you can say in 3 minutes.

Written testimony is still posted through the [testimony portal](#), and legislators will be better able to follow along if you have submitted testimony before the hearing.

If you need Maine Equal Justice to help you with this step, please let us know.

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***More information on developing testimony below***
When it’s your turn to speak:

When you are invited to speak, make sure you are off mute on your end. To help the Committee focus on your words, try to testify in a spot in your home where you have a reliable internet connection, and as little background noise and visual distraction as possible. You can blur your background to preserve your privacy.

Greet the committee and introduce yourself like this: “Senator Claxton, Representative Meyer, and honorable members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services: my name is ____, I live in (town or city)____ and I am here today to testify in favor of LD____.”

Then, share your testimony. After you are finished, you can offer to answer questions if you are comfortable. Committee members will have the chance to ask clarifying questions. It is always OK to say you don’t know the answer. You can offer to get the committee the information after the hearing. Maine Equal Justice can help you do this.

On the day of the hearing, Maine Equal Justice staff will set up an online chat space so we can communicate throughout the hearing.

Questions? Call or Text Kate: 207-754-1489.

Step 6: Submitting testimony:

Whether you attend the hearing or not, you can submit testimony through the online portal found on the Maine Legislature’s website. When submitted this way, it is automatically sent to members of the committee. The online submission form can be found here.

Here’s an example of how testimony can be structured:

1. Introduction: “Senator Claxton, Representative Meyer, and honorable members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services: my name is ____, I live in (town or city)____ and I am here today to testify in favor of LD____.”

2. Key messages: Pick one or two -- just one sentence on each.

3. Story: Tell a story that illustrates your main point.

4. Closing: Reinforce your key message (again, just a sentence) and thank the committee.
These are the important things to remember:

1. The best way to get your point across is to share your story. The committee will hear plenty of facts and figures from policy and legal “experts”. We need to show them the human impact of the policy they're considering.

2. You have 3 minutes to speak, and the time goes by fast! You really only have time to say your key message and tell a story to illustrate your point.

3. You are making a difference! The legislature must act boldly this year to address economic justice and racial equity in Maine. We have heard from many legislators over the years that people who come to testify have a huge impact on the outcome of legislation. Governor Mills, members of the media, and other officials listen to hearings sometimes, too. You have a powerful story to share that can support policies that help thousands of Mainers. Your voice matters.

Step 7: After the hearing Send a thank you email to committee members reinforcing the key points you made in your testimony. Work with Maine Equal Justice staff to follow up with key legislators to make sure there is a strong vote on your bill.