



December 8, 2020

Standing Committee Chairpersons, Executive Committee Members, and Clerk of the Legislature
Nebraska Legislative Council
State Capitol
Lincoln, NE 68509

Dear Senators and Mr. O'Donnell,

On behalf of the Coalition for a Strong Nebraska – which includes more than 100 statewide nonprofit advocacy and service provider organizations – and the undersigned organizations, we encourage you to adopt updated committee hearing processes to ensure safety and accessibility to public hearings.

We have no doubt that the Legislature has worked diligently to modify every aspect required to run a legislative session due to the pandemic. We appreciate the work that has been done to protect the safety of the public as well as the legislators and the Legislative Council's staff. We believe, however, that there are many benefits that can be gained by modifying some of the hearing procedures and programs.

It is vital, for the sake of institutional integrity, to ensure that committee rules and procedures are uniform. The standing committees do not uniformly accept and record the public's participation in each hearing. While we respect that each committee, and each chairperson, with broad-ranging content and workload, has to have a certain level of autonomy in deciding their committee's procedures, we respectfully ask you to consider the following, which we believe will provide committees with greater freedom, lessen their workload, and promote a safer and more accessible level of public participation in bill hearings.

The Legislature has investigated online testimony submission before. The details on how it would work, we understand, has stalled further discussions. We propose that the Clerk of the Legislature and the Executive Board consider adoption of a policy to allow the submission of testimony online. Other states have created such systems, including Maine¹ and Hawaii², that

¹ <https://www.mainelegislature.org/testimony/>
<https://www.themainewire.com/2019/04/how-to-submit-testimony-via-the-legislatures-new-online-system/>
Testimony may be submitted as soon as the bill is scheduled for public hearing.

² <https://www.capitol.hawaii.gov/login/login.aspx>
Create an account online to submit online testimony, allows creation of personalized tracking lists and email notifications of hearings. Testimony is posted on the Legislature's website and is public and may be submitted up to 24 hours prior to the hearing.

allow online submissions to be put into a file that is automatically made a part of a bill's webpage, along with the Statement of Intent, Committee Statement, and Fiscal Note. Links to those state's submission forms are below.

Much has been said, and the chairpersons have expressed concern, about whether or not letters submitted for the record should be on the official Committee Statement. We believe that allowing testimony to be submitted online will relieve chairpersons from having to make that determination. All written testimony and letters for the record, should be submitted online. All online submissions can then be placed in a separate file automatically, accessible on the bill's page online, which is part of the public record. Committee Statements can remain reserved for the testimony received in person. This makes the handling of written testimony uniform among the committees, relieves committee clerks from the tedious task of gathering and distributing written testimony to committee members, and provides an equal forum for written public participation for those who live hours away from Lincoln, and for those who are ill, vulnerable to illness, in quarantine, physically challenged, unable to take time off from work, caring for children or others, or want to stay as safe as possible.

An effort to provide greater opportunities for participation via virtual testimony would greatly benefit even more Nebraskans; and we believe this idea will remove the barriers to online written testimony submission for both the public and committee staff is a reasonable start.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

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