



September 28, 2021

Senate Committee on Ways and Means  
Sen. Michael J. Rodrigues, Chair

House Committee on Ways and Means  
Rep. Aaron Michlewitz, Chair

House Committee on Federal Stimulus and Census Oversight  
Rep. Daniel J. Hunt, Chair

**RE: ARPA Funding for IT to Support Access to Municipal Meetings**

Dear Chairman Rodrigues, Chairman Michlewitz, Chairman Hunt and committee members:

We write to urge you to use a portion of American Rescue Plan Act money to make a transformational investment in our democracy in response to needs revealed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, we request that you dedicate funds to create a grant program to improve the technological capacity of our cities and towns to conduct accessible public meetings — by enabling residents to join a meeting and contribute to the proceedings both in person and remotely.

During the COVID-19 State of Emergency, municipalities learned to conduct meetings remotely, and new technological access significantly increased public participation in local government meetings, especially for people with disabilities, home-bound elders, parents without babysitters, rural residents, and family caregivers. As the Commonwealth moves forward, many municipalities want to make the most of this new civic engagement, continue to protect public health, and simultaneously improve both access and equity, by combining traditional in-person meetings with tech-supported remote participation. Yet cities and towns need financial and technical assistance to be able to provide this important kind of access.

### Proposal: \$10M grant program for municipal IT for public meeting access

A municipal or regional grant program will provide funding for technology upgrades and acquisitions, as well as technical support, for communities that seek to protect public health and increase equitable participation by conducting “hybrid” meetings that give residents the option to either attend meetings in person or to actively participate via remote technology (as people have done when the legislature has held hearings this past year). This funding should be made available directly to cities and towns and to regional entities that can help cities and towns meet their residents’ technology needs.

Even as some public bodies begin to return to in-person meetings, the continued presence of COVID-19, its variants, and breakthrough cases will mean that vulnerable residents will continue to need remote access to public meetings. To safeguard public health, many municipalities will need to upgrade their meeting rooms in order to have adequate internet capacity, cameras and microphones to capture the activity in the room, the means for people in the room to hear and converse with remote participants in real time, and technological support for municipal officials adopting new technology.

Many municipalities will need support to enable these changes. Equipment and meeting room set-up can be scaled to meet the needs of different public bodies, and a grant program will give municipalities the flexibility to assess what upgrades work best for their communities.

We recommend that a grant program be administered by the Office of Municipal and School Technology (OMST) within the Executive Office of Technology Services and Security (EOTSS), in consultation with the Attorney General’s Division of Open Government and the Massachusetts Office on Disability (MOD).

### Funding for municipal IT needs is essential to preserve public health and strengthen civic engagement

The COVID pandemic has demonstrated that public bodies need to adapt to ensure that all residents can safely and fully access and participate in public meetings. Such adaptation has been — and will continue to be — essential to protect public health and enable people to provide input on the important decisions local bodies make that deeply affect their lives and the lives of their families.

When remote access became a necessity in response to the pandemic, it did not merely preserve public bodies’ ability to operate; it also opened the door to civic engagement for many groups of people who had previously been shut out. These include:

- Seniors with mobility issues
- People with disabilities
- Caregivers who cannot leave those they must watch over
- Parents with young children
- People who cannot drive or afford taxis and Ubers
- People with chronic medical conditions
- Immunocompromised individuals and their family members
- People in COVID isolation or quarantine

It is critical that we continue to ensure access for these populations. At the same time, meetings conducted exclusively by remote, virtual means are not accessible to people who lack reliable internet, access to appropriate technology and devices (if, for example, their children are doing homework on the family computer), or comfort and skill with the technology.

By conducting meetings that are both in-person and also accessible remotely, cities and towns can protect public health, maximize public participation, and minimize exclusion from the workings of democracy. But the ability of towns to do this will hinge entirely on access to funding for the technological purchases, upgrades and space redesigns that make this public access possible. ARPA provides the opportunity to provide this one-time assistance that will have lasting positive results for towns and their residents.

We respectfully request that you use a very small portion of ARPA funds to support these critical upgrades to our democratic infrastructure.

Sincerely,

*ACLU of Massachusetts*

*Boston Center for Independent Living*

*Common Cause Massachusetts*

*Disability Law Center*

*Massachusetts Newspaper Publishers Association*

*Metropolitan Area Planning Council*

*MASSPIRG*

*New England First Amendment Coalition*