



March 17, 2022

To: Members of the Governor's Council

Re: Restoring public virtual access to Governor's Council meetings

Honorable Members of the Massachusetts Governor's Council,

In light of Sunshine Week 2022, we are writing to you to request that you maintain the same level of public access to Governor's Council meetings that the people of Massachusetts have depended on over the last two years.

More transparent and accessible government means a stronger democracy for all. That's why our organizations have teamed up to advocate for permanent virtual access to public government meetings in addition to in-person access. We were discouraged to learn that the Governor's Council recently discontinued its online streaming of meetings. We hope you will reconsider this decision.

We applauded Governor Baker's decision to include in his COVID-19 emergency order virtual access expansions to the Open Meeting Law. Likewise, we celebrated that government entities not covered by the Open Meeting Law also worked quickly to ensure remote access for members of the public. 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 members of the public and many people who had previously been shut out. These include:

- Seniors with mobility issues
- People with disabilities
- Parents with young children
- People with eldercare and other adult care responsibilities
- People who cannot drive or afford taxis or rideshares
- People with chronic medical conditions
- Immunocompromised individuals and their family members
- Members of the public who want to know more about their government

In the case of government entities based in Boston, like the Governor's Council, live streaming enables people to tune in from every corner of the state; discontinuing remote access is devastating for regional equity.

Remote access is the latest instance of universal design—alongside curb cuts, elevators, closed captioning, audiobooks, and other features—that began as accommodations and expanded to universal popularity. Like these innovations and others emerging during the pandemic, remote access to public meetings should become a permanent feature. Eliminating remote participation now shuts the doors on so many who have, for the first time ever, been able to access and engage their government without hindrance or just wanted to learn more about government decisions. Virtual access must be a part of our new normal in a 21st century democracy.

The people deserve to know what their government is doing. The important work of the Governor’s Council to evaluate judges and other gubernatorial appointments, consider pardons and commutations, and review warrants for the state treasury impacts the lives of all 6.9 million residents of the Commonwealth. In the spirit of Sunshine Week 2022, we respectfully ask that you work quickly to reestablish the means by which people can virtually access the Governor’s Council meetings in addition to attending in person.

Sincerely,

ACLU of Massachusetts
Boston Center for Independent Living
Common Cause Massachusetts
Disability Law Center
Massachusetts Newspaper Publishers Association
MASSPIRG
New England First Amendment Coalition
New England Newspaper and Press Association

Cc: Lieutenant Governor Karyn Polito
Speaker of the House Ronald Mariano
Senate President Karen Spilka