

Virtual Public Engagement During COVID-19 for MVP Grants

A key component to the Municipal Vulnerability Preparedness (MVP) program is public engagement. The MVP Planning Grant process includes at least three in-person, group meetings: a Core Team meeting, the Community Resilience Building (CRB) Workshop, and Public Listening Session. Action Grants can vary in the amount of public participation depending on the scope of the project. During this time of Covid-19 and the need for social distancing, meeting the various requirements for public engagement within the MVP program will require outside of the box thinking and utilizing a variety of formats. This is an opportunity to consider ways of gaining and incorporating feedback from community members who may have been unable to participate during in-person meetings and workshops.

While online formats can offer alternatives to in person engagement, we also recognize that some communities have no access to internet and that online formats can decrease the participation from Environmental Justice and other Climate Vulnerable Populations. In order to create equitable engagement in any MVP grant it is recommended that engagement is a top priority that happens early and often.

To gain participation for a planning or action grant it is necessary that a community is informed about what is going on. The following are some suggestions that could be used at any point to inform, generate ideas and discussion, gather information or reflect outcomes. When working in communities that have non-English speakers, translations services should be used.

Possible Engagement Tools for the MVP Process
Place an ad/notice in local print/online newsletters explaining the nature of the project.
Direct mailings to residents and stakeholders informing them of options to participate.
Work with local schools to incorporate student participation into the learn-at-home curriculum.
Create a project webpage linked to the Town website where all project information, including documents and links are available.
Develop a project hotline where stakeholders can call to learn how to participate and leave messages regarding comments and questions.
Use local email lists, social media outlets, and Google groups.
Develop a series of online workshops and/or an online speaker series. This could also take the form of a podcast.

Most Importantly, reach out to your Regional Coordinator to discuss the details of your proposed virtual approach.

Below are some suggestions for modifications based on a planning grant format. These suggestions could also be considered for Action Grant projects, depending on the scope.

Core Team Meetings

Typical Format:

In-person meeting at Town Hall with representatives from municipal departments and any other core stakeholders.

Possible Virtual Format:

Meeting conducted over Skype, Zoom, or other online conference call platform. In the interest of accessibility, consider providing a phone call-in line to online meetings as well. Meeting materials should be shared in advance via email. For communities without enough internet coverage, this could also be a conference call between all the parties.

Resources:

Suggestions for how to run an online meeting:

- <https://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/learning-innovation/7-best-practices-covid-19-necessitated-online-meetings>
- <https://www.cbi.org/article/10-tips-for-improving-our-online-meetings/>
- <https://iap2.org.au/covid-19/>
- <https://merid.org/7-tips-designing-virtual-meetings/>
- <https://merid.org/takeaways-facilitating-virtual-meetings/>

CRB Workshop

Typical Format:

One 8-hour, or two 4-hour, in-person workshop(s) with representatives from municipal departments, local organizations, State agencies, surrounding communities, and other stakeholders.

Possible Virtual Format:

Like Core Team Meetings, workshops could be conducted over Skype or other online conference call platforms, specifically platforms that allow for break out rooms where smaller groups can meet and discuss specific topics. Many online conference call platforms provide a phone line as well for those unable to join online. Check that the platform you choose allows for this function. Meeting materials can be shared with workshop attendees in advance via email or mail, or both, depending on the needs of the community.

When switching to an online or phone format for a CRB workshop, it is important to consider that participants attention spans are not the same as during an in-person format. Studies suggest keeping remote formats to two hours. During the Covid-19 pandemic many have competing needs for their attention such as children or unwell family members. Having multiple, but shorter, remote formats allows for greater participation.

For communities without enough internet coverage for some, or all participants, conducting a non-interface CRB workshop poses greater challenges. While a conference call between all the parties is an option, it might be more useful to consider conference calls between specific participant groups. Once

these group calls have been accomplished, the information generated by each group will need to be shared among the entire group. This could happen through a document circulated by mail or by linking relevant documents to a project website. While some residents do not have internet access in their home, many are driving regularly to internet locations to check email and other online matters.

It is important that you identify a process that will meet the Community Resilience Building Workshop's four core objectives, and others that are outlined in your MVP Scope of Services.

Examples of activities that could meet the objectives are outlined below. Feel free to propose a different approach to your regional coordinator.

Characterize hazards

- Meet with the Core Team (conference call or online) to select four main hazards in advance of the workshop that relate to infrastructure, societal and environmental features of the community.
- Hazards could be presented to workshop participants with a live online, video, or podcast presentation and prioritized through a survey.

Identify Community Vulnerabilities and Strengths

- A survey could be mailed or emailed out to participants prior to the workshop to identify vulnerabilities and strengths.
- Participants could identify vulnerabilities and strengths during webinars or conference calls detailed below.

Identify and Prioritize Community Actions

- Host three webinars or podcasts, each related to one of the following topic areas: infrastructure, society, and the environment. Invite workshop attendees to attend the webinar that most closely relates to their field and area of expertise.
- Host calls (phone, Skype, or other) with small groups of attendees, to replicate the workshop table format (no more than 8 attendees on each Skype call). Facilitate discussion related to hazards, features, and proposed adaptation actions.
- Record and share an introductory presentation and use an interactive platform like Qualtrics to collect input related to hazards, local features, and proposed adaptation actions that participants can interact with on their own time over a designated period.

Determine the Overall Priority Actions

- Host a meeting to debrief on features and actions identified in the steps above and vote on priority actions. This could be through a collective document, polling application, or a virtual "sticky-note" platform. Or a short video could be created and posted on a town website along with a survey to prioritize actions.

Resources:

- Collaborate by creating and sharing virtual sticky notes: www.ideaflip.com
- Create collaborative mind maps in real-time with your team: www.mindmeister.com
- Create an online "whiteboard" for team brainstorming: www.webwhiteboard.com
- Use polling tools to rank preferences or collect other information: <https://www.poll Everywhere.com/>
- For more online tools for collaboration: <https://www.cbi.org/article/using-online-tools-to-empower-collaboration/>

Public Listening Session

Typical Format:

Daytime or evening meeting open to all members of the public.

Possible Virtual Formats:

The important part of the listening session is that you can present the draft report to the public and gain feedback.

Possible activities could include:

- A webinar recorded and posted on the Town Website, along with a survey shared with the public to collect feedback through an online form such as SurveyMonkey.
- Recording the typical listening session presentation for Local Access TV and seeking input through a survey.
- Working with a local radio station to broadcast the information and seeking input through a survey.
- In addition to one of the above, increasing the promotion of the public comment period for the report.
- Creating a podcast about the draft report and seeking input through a survey or other means.

Resources:

- www.surveymonkey.com
- www.sogosurvey.com