



# Civic Voice During COVID-19

A SIDE Event Playbook for Members of  
Congress and Their Communities

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**beeckcenter**  
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# About This Report

This living report — which we will update at regular intervals throughout 2020 and 2021 — examines how Members of Congress can utilize newly available communications technology to gather, format and enter public witness testimony as data for the official record. It is an initial step in a long term goal to build local, human-authenticated civic voice archives for use in the deliberative process of lawmaking and for the maintenance of legislative history in the First Branch of government.

The information in this report was gathered and presented by Lorelei Kelly, fellow at the **[Beeck Center for Social Impact + Innovation at Georgetown University](#)**. This work is supported by Democracy Fund. The findings and conclusions contained within are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect positions or policies of the foundation. The Beeck Center gratefully acknowledges the efforts and insights of the organizations, individuals, and government agencies that have been working in this ecosystem for years.

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# Introduction

In response to COVID-19, Members of Congress have been adapting by connecting with constituents using video conferencing platforms, holding hybrid online/offline meetings, having socially-distant in-person convenings, and accepting invitations to online events held by community groups hoping to provide local input to Congress

In mid-May 2020, the House of Representatives passed [House Resolution 965](#), an emergency measure in response to COVID-19 that **allows for congressional deliberations to occur virtually**, with remote committee procedures and proxy voting. These emergency changes are dramatic for an institution steeped in the tradition of physical presence. While the Senate has also adapted, it has not yet changed its digital document workflow. This playbook is therefore written for House activities.

As of July 27, 2020, Members are allowed to use the Zoom platform to connect with constituents. This change opens up a new opportunity for constituents and congressional representatives to meet. Now that Congress is able to use an electronic workflow, a virtual SIDE Event can be an effective place for Members to discuss important policy issues with their constituents. After these virtual events, Members may submit written public testimony as input for the official record. A virtual SIDE Event facilitates the process of making local feedback an accessible and productive part of lawmaking now and in the future.

## Out With the Clipboard, in With the “e-Hopper”

Congress’ operations during COVID-19 are pushing our most democratic governing institutions to become modern digital workplaces. Like the rest of society, members and staff are suddenly learning how to work from home. On Capitol Hill, stacks of legal papers have been replaced by the E-Hopper — a secure, dedicated email system for electronic submission of congressional documents.<sup>1</sup> Members have readily adapted to the new online method and have filed thousands of items electronically. Congressional staff — both in Washington, DC and in 900 plus district offices across the USA are working to respond

<sup>1</sup> Please see [Chair Zoe Lofgren’s \(CA\) opening remarks](#) to the Committee on House Administration on July 17, 2020, start 10:00.

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## DEFINITIONS

**SIDE** stands for Stakeholders, Individuals, Data and Evidence.

**A SIDE Event** is a more agile mechanism for members and communities — a compromise between open mic town halls and rule-restrictive committee field hearings.

**Civil Society organizations** sit between government and communities to mobilize citizen voice and participation for collective action.

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## KEY RESOURCE

The skills to use Zoom effectively are uneven in Congress, and vary office to office. Civil society organizations with Zoom conferencing skills can help bridge this capacity gap.

[Civil Society call to Action! Zoom Comes to Congress](#)

to COVID-19 and its impact in districts and on our nation as a whole. Likewise, official committee hearings have moved online or occur in a hybrid online/in person format using [House-sanctioned](#) video conferencing platforms.

At some point in the future, members and staff will be able to return to work in person. The pandemic has created an opportunity to get skilled and comfortable using remote or hybrid platforms for communicating with their constituents, including at the district-level. This is the time to build methods that expand opportunities for local voices to be included in the deliberative process of policymaking. Indeed, the shift online will not only spur modernization, but could also increase the representative potential of Congress. Your SIDE Event could be all virtual, hybrid or in-person with a venue appropriate for social distancing. Please keep in mind your local safety regulations while planning.

The SIDE Event was designed to strengthen the relationship between local communities and Members of Congress. Its format provides guidance on sorting and filtering information for the record on policy. The SIDE method is a human-authenticated channel that provides an alternative to information coming from digital media campaigns, paid lobbyists and subscription stakeholder associations or corporations. We seek to facilitate information exchange that is 1) moderated by a local community leader and 2) put forward in a common space by individuals who live in a shared geography and who experience the consequences of federal policy in their own communities. We believe this method will build resilience because it is premised on relationships that are local, in person and more accountable to mutually shared outcomes.

Members of Congress are convening online roundtables and leading community discussions via video conference. They are adapting the familiar Town Hall model. Since the onset of COVID-19 restrictions, members and their staff have been attending virtual or hybrid events organized by constituents and stakeholders. The SIDE Event builds on this evolving digital norm. It is a local, member-led method to make constituent input more timely and relevant in the traditional channels of congressional communication. A key outcome is to gather district-based, public witness testimony in a standardized format which the Member then enters in the newly electronic official record.

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### KEEP IN MIND

Places are limited to ensure the quality of discussion.

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### READ ON

Since January, 2019, the [Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress](#) has examined ways to reform and update how Congress is organized. [Its bipartisan recommendations provide important context.](#)

The Beeck Center has been advocating for Congress to use modern tools to invite more civic voices into its workflow. COVID-19 has created the moment for this modernization. By using digital tools, Congress -- as a representative governing body-- is opening possibilities for a more inclusive deliberative process. This is just the first step. As Members grow more comfortable and confident with data and technology, Congress can also build archives for legislative history with a broader cross-section of input, both geographic and topical, and a wider array of information for the record. We call these potential future repositories “civic voice archives.” The House of Representatives already has [digital document repositories](#), which provide inspiration and a basic model.

We created this SIDE Event playbook for House Members to use in their districts so that the inclusion of civic voice becomes part of our new democratic norms. We rely on civil society and community members to help lead the way locally by sharing this playbook with Members and their district staff and by working to build trust and confidence in modern methods like this SIDE Event.

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#### CALL TO ACTION

During COVID-19, Members of Congress rely on [local civil society](#) to connect and communicate. Call 202-224-3121 to find the closest district office number or visit [www.house.gov](http://www.house.gov). Share this playbook with your Member and their staff!



## Why We Need SIDE Events

Members of Congress and their staff have important roles to play in ensuring that constituent input is included in the legislative process, especially during the disruption brought about during the COVID-19 pandemic. Indeed, members consistently need diverse options for constituent engagement on policy topics. While it was piloted in person, the SIDE Event is also a new digital method for gathering and archiving community input. It is a more agile mechanism for members and communities--one that compromises between open mic town halls and rule-restrictive committee hearings.

The outdated systems of Congress have constrained the use of valuable civic feedback in the deliberative process of policymaking. Three-ring binders and old metal file cabinets symbolize this paper-based tradition. A silver lining of today's emergency rules could be that Congress moves more fully into the digital age. Indeed, Members and their staff can now collect and contribute civic input in electronic formats. SIDE Events are an efficient and effective way to gather such input.

SIDE Events are timely. The Office of the Clerk recently issued a report on [Adopting Standardized Formats for Legislative Documents](#). Moreover, archivists and historians work in the [House](#) and the [Senate](#) and may provide useful advice on how to build data infrastructure that is both modern and more inclusive. The U.S. National Archives — part of the First Branch of Government — also has a [Legislative Advisory Committee](#). The House [technology timeline](#) illustrates how Congress adapts. But let's start with what can be done today. The first step in contributing to the newly created "e-Hopper" repository is structuring input for the record so that it can be readily located and accessed. The case study below serves as a model to help you get started.

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### QUICK READ

[Timeline of our SIDE Event pilot in New Hampshire.](#)

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### IMPORTANT!

SIDE Events are not official committee events. Rather, they are vital supplements to the regular information-gathering processes of Congress because they make productive use of human-authenticated community input for policy considerations.

## Solution: The SIDE Event engagement model

While the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted the in-person, hard-copy status-quo, it has also opened the opportunity to build a more modern, inclusive system.

A SIDE Event allows Members to effectively use the record of Congress in two ways: To ensure constituent input is included as Congress deliberates, and to offer a way to include more data from wider geographic areas into the subject matter memory of lawmaking.

### Background: SIDE Events

Committees in the House and Senate rely on knowledgeable individuals to help provide input for their governing duties. In an official hearing, panels of expert witnesses testify in large meeting rooms to inform Congress and the public about policy and issues of the day. The House and the Senate share three types of committee hearings: **legislative, oversight, and investigative**. These official hearings can happen either on Capitol Hill, or in states and districts as field hearings. Over recent decades, hearings have diminished to around **50% of previous levels**. This form of congressional meeting is the main public touchpoint for topical subject matter expertise in our legislative institutions, and their decline diminishes the representative nature of our governing system.

The SIDE Event began in response to those concerns as a research effort on how Congress can be more inclusive during the **congressional field hearing process**. Specifically, a network of individuals who consider themselves friends of Congress began to regularly discuss how to assist Members and staff after the establishment of the **Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress**. The **SIDE framework** was originally conceived of by a technology working group organized by the **American Political Science Association**.<sup>2</sup> Currently, the SIDE Event process is designed for use within the U.S. House of Representatives,<sup>3</sup> primarily because in our system of government, House Members are the elected leaders that live and work the closest to the American people.

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2 As Congress becomes more technologically advanced, the submission of data and evidence as machine readable, structured documents will become normal. Please see **our sample template**.

3 Every committee has its own **rules & requirements**.

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#### KEY RESOURCE

A guide to pitching your Member on leading a SIDE Event is **available here**.

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#### ACRONYM

A SIDE Event is a Member-led public event that brings Stakeholders, Individuals, Data, and Evidence together on a topic of local concern.

An individual Member represents approximately 750,000 Americans, and nearly half of all congressional staff reside in states and districts.

The original goal of this SIDE Event pilot<sup>4</sup> was to reveal new ways for individuals and communities to input expertise and lived experience into the formative deliberations around policy and to maintain the input as part of Congress' digital data repository. A secondary goal was to find ways to structure the information from these gatherings so that civic voice data can be entered into automated systems in Congress, and stored as a policy resource. The Beeck Center continues to explore how this pilot can scale and become standard practice across 50 states, 435 congressional districts and six territories. **The SIDE framework offers a way to improve representative government, build legitimacy, and enrich the knowledge base for lawmaking.**

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### IMPORTANT NOTE

The SIDE Event is especially useful amid the COVID-19 disruption of regular operations in Congress. It addresses the need to hear directly from communities on how they are coping, making use of relief funds, and organizing themselves to respond.

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<sup>4</sup> The SIDE Framework was developed by a [Technology Task Force](#) of the American Political Science Association after Congress created the [Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress](#).





## How-to Guide: SIDE Events

### ONE

#### Identify a SIDE Event Topic

While any issue could be the subject of a SIDE Event, an ideal topic is one that is either:

- ▶ of both local and national concern, but has not yet been defined as a national policy issue (e.g., COVID-19 response, local land use on public lands)
- ▶ covering a new topic (e.g., digital workforce development, infrastructure plan)
- ▶ a national or global issue that has local implications (e.g., building community resilience to climate change, regenerative agriculture, water)

The inspiration behind the SIDE Event is to equip communities to gather the input of those most impacted and who are historically underrepresented in the official records of Congress. Americans should not need paid stakeholders or lobbyists to raise visibility of their local concerns.

*“People were interested in seeing their Members of Congress hold an event or hearing-style event in their districts, sit down with constituents and activists, and discuss the stories and solutions of a certain topic that strikes a balance of education and emotion.” –District Staffer*

#### KEY RESOURCE

A guide to identifying a SIDE Event topic is [available here](#).

#### HELPFUL TIP

Establish a social media presence to invite people to your SIDE Event. Use hashtags for #SIDEEvent, your topic (ie. #COVID19 #CivicVoice), and your district (i.e., #NH01 or #NH02). Also, add photos from your district!

## TWO

# Lead the SIDE Event

Members can use something like the following to address participants at the beginning of the SIDE Event:

*My staff and I organized this event so that I can hear your voices about [TOPIC], which is an issue that is significant for all of us. I'm piloting this process to better represent you and so that I can work with my colleagues in the House of Representatives while informed by the timely priorities of our community.*

*Last spring, Congress passed an emergency measure that allows the deliberative process of committees to occur at a distance using video conferencing technology. While this is not an official committee event, it is a vital supplement to the regular information-gathering process of Congress.*

*It is my hope and intention to help this community and our nation come through the COVID-19 pandemic better than ever. To that end, this SIDE Event is an innovative and new way to prioritize data in federal legislation. When I say "data" I do not mean a pile of spreadsheets and pie charts. Although those are useful and a welcome part of the process, this SIDE Event is more about you. I want to hear from you about your lived experience in relation to [TOPIC]. I am interested in knowing what is working and where our challenges lie. By better understanding outcomes, lawmakers like me can make informed decisions in context and in the daily process of our lawmaking duties both here and back on Capitol Hill.*

*You can use this form ([template](#)) to submit your information, and ground rules for public witness and audience participation apply. If you would, please take a few minutes to read them ([template](#)) before the event commences.*

*Finally, this SIDE Event is an opportunity to move away from the politics of issues—the alarming headlines that we all see that often seem to have little relevance to our local concerns. This setting is a way to reap the best intentions of our community, to inform ourselves, to contribute, to listen and for me, to act on your civic voice.*

*Thank you for attending today.*

## KEY RESOURCE

Members can use this [Ground Rules Template](#) as a hand out to participants or to read during opening remarks.

## THREE

### Format testimony with keywords.

House Members typically enter information into the official Congressional Record using a formatted document. They do this while attending committee hearings or on the House Floor. Entering SIDE Event information is similar, but requires its own searchable keywords (also called tags). We suggest starting with the four-character district abbreviation (i.e. AR02) District constituent service and constituent engagement staff should “tag” the submitted information in a digital format so that it can be found amidst the vast trove of data entered into Congress’ official repositories.

We have created a [sample template](#) to get you started. Creating standard data is an ongoing challenge as obsolete government systems upgrade to digital platforms (think about the Healthcare.gov website rollout debacle in 2013). For this reason, COVID-19 may have a silver lining for modernization. Remember that experts on Congress’ institutional memory exist to help you! The National Archives’ [Legislative Advisory Committee](#) for example. Likewise, you can review the [Legislative Data and Transparency Conference](#) convened annually by the House Clerk, or look at formats provided by your office vendors. The SIDE Event method offers promising practices for structuring data so that, in the future, locally generated information will be discoverable, searchable and a useful tool to inform policy. Tagged information can be added in one of two ways, listed here in order of preference, as discovered in the pilot:

- ▶ Members through their committees enter information into committee repositories, and
- ▶ Members enter the information into the record as extensions of remarks on the floor. (Now the “e-Hopper”) This information then shows up in the Daily Digest of Congress in the Congressional Record.

Pilot partner Rep. Annie Kuster entered her SIDE Event testimony into the record during a House Energy and Commerce [Environment and Climate Change Subcommittee markup session](#). Here she is on C-SPAN [speaking about the successful PFAS bill](#) on the House Floor.

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#### KEY RESOURCE

Participants can use this [SIDE Event Testimony Template](#) to submit information for the record.



## CASE STUDY

# SIDE Event Pilot on the PFAS Bill on Groundwater Contamination in New Hampshire

## Background

**Pilot Location:** Litchfield Town Hall, Litchfield, New Hampshire. This is a community that experienced **per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) contamination** from nearby industrial and military facilities.

**Topic for Deliberation:** PFAS, a family of toxic compounds with commercial and military uses, has contaminated groundwater and drinking water in communities across the state. The issue had already garnered a broad swath of interest, and was one that required congressional involvement since it could not be addressed exclusively at the local level. The topic spurred a grassroots effort to pressure state and national-level policymakers to regulate PFAS and clean up contaminated sites. Public outcry and local-level organizing in states throughout the country resulted in a number of high-profile hearings and a **bipartisan bill** that was working its way through Congress.

## Who was involved in organizing the event?

**The Institution of Congress:** Congress is the nation's lawmaking body. It makes rules that have far reaching implications for the entire United States. For example, in our case study **The PFAS Action Act of 2019** had already generated widespread discussion because PFAS is a national issue, and both members of the NH delegation

*This photo above shows the room arrangement for the SIDE Event pilot in Litchfield, New Hampshire. During COVID-19, this room might be a video conference platform.*

*Photo courtesy of Rep. Annie Kuster staff.*

signed on in support. This SIDE Event playbook is informed by organizations inside the institution including committees and must adhere to congressional and committee rules.

**Institutional Intermediaries:** Members of Congress. The New Hampshire congressional delegation consists of Representative Annie Kuster (NH02) and Representative Chris Pappas (NH01), both of whom led the pilot SIDE Event.

**Local Pathfinder:** A civil society organization with deep roots in community deliberation. In our pilot, [New Hampshire Listens](#) played this role. During field research, the university was represented by two faculty members at the Carsey Center for Public Policy; Michele Holt-Shannon and Daniel Bromberg.

**District Staff:** In this pilot, Charlotte Harris and Tom Giancola were instrumental. Both work on Constituent Service and Outreach for Rep. Ann McLane Kuster (NH02)

**Civic Design Innovation:** Lorelei Kelly, Fellow, [Beeck Center for Social Impact + Innovation](#), Georgetown University

**Gov Tech Expertise:** Marci Harris, CEO of [Popvox](#), a social-mission tech startup

## Context and Outcome

**Civic Setting:** New Hampshire is a state with a rich history of participation in self-government. With over 420 members, New Hampshire's state legislature is the largest in the U.S. The robust representation and low barrier to entry are sources of civic pride for Granite Staters. [State law in New Hampshire](#) requires specific instruction in the privileges, duties, and responsibilities of citizenship and in the history, government, and constitutions of both the state and the nation. Indeed, New Hampshire scores a [healthy civic ranking](#) among the 50 United States. Because it is the first presidential primary state, residents of New Hampshire experience regular and in depth opportunities for deep public discourse with national significance.

**Outcome:** The PFAS bipartisan bill [passed the House](#) in January 2020, informed by the public witness testimony gathered at the New Hampshire SIDE Event.

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### KEY RESOURCE

A guide for identifying a local support network for planning a SIDE Event is [available here](#).

## Who participates as primary witnesses?

When selecting witnesses for the SIDE Event, think about a cross-section of voices in your district or state. Who has context, memory and a unique perspective? Try to build a panel that mixes lived experience and academic or conventional expert knowledge. State and local officials provide important insights. This reflection from a district staffer offers a helpful perspective:

*“For participants, we had a mix of grassroots community activists, academics/scientists, municipal advocates, state regulators, and state representatives. One interesting success of this SIDE Event was that we involved different levels of government by having State Representatives both at the table and in the audience.” –District Staffer*

See this [Run of Show document](#) for details about participants in the New Hampshire pilot.

### HELPFUL TIP

Find potential SIDE participants in your constituent mail! Could your Legislative Correspondent create a list of thoughtful, typically interested individuals in the district? They could be invited as witnesses or audience members.

*Carsey School at the University of New Hampshire —below— houses New Hampshire Listens, a civic engagement initiative. Images courtesy of University of New Hampshire.*



# Looking Ahead: Future Implications of SIDE Events

With the SIDE Event model, we envision Members of Congress and congressional staff will be able to:

- ▶ Ensure that a cross section of the community is represented when a Member of Congress organizes a gathering
- ▶ Ensure that input to gatherings is accessible to all Members of the community — especially those impacted by an issue
- ▶ Ensure collected data provides an accurate representation of community information shared at the gathering
- ▶ Ensure the collected data is tagged in a way that it can be searched and discovered in the Congressional Record or future archive
- ▶ Renew civic connection to elected leaders
- ▶ Demonstrate a method that is both participatory and institutionally curated by Members to be useful in crafting policy
- ▶ Demonstrate a way to broaden the notion of “expertise” to include lived experience in a geographic area
- ▶ Demonstrate methods to collect authenticated, human-verified information in a weaponized media environment
- ▶ Guarantee continuity of Congress by working either online/hybrid or in person, as the emerging situation requires

## Key Resources for SIDE Events

- ▶ [Identifying a SIDE Event local support network](#)
- ▶ [Civil Society Call to Action: the Zoom Opportunity](#)
- ▶ [HOW TO: Identify a SIDE Event Topic](#)
- ▶ [HOW TO: Pitch a SIDE Event To your Member](#)
- ▶ [HOW TO: Plan SIDE Event](#)
  - [Run of Show](#)
  - [SIDE Event Testimony Template](#)
- ▶ [Ground Rules for a SIDE Event](#)

# Final Notes

This guide is a result of continuing research and we welcome feedback to improve this SIDE Event model, so please let us know if you are willing to be interviewed about your experience. If you would like additional information about bringing SIDE Events to your district, you can contact the Beeck Center via email at [beeckcenter@georgetown.edu](mailto:beeckcenter@georgetown.edu), or tweet [@beeckcenter](https://twitter.com/beeckcenter) with the hashtag #CivicVoice.

The Beeck Center works alongside a number of partners in this work, including New York University's [GovLab](#) which has compiled a [catalog of models](#) for additional ways of convening with communities, both online and off. Their list includes methods of democratic legislatures around the world who have moved to remote platforms to conduct their deliberative functions, some of whom have recently begun remote operations in response to COVID-19, and others who have been operating remotely for years.

## Acknowledgements

This SIDE Event model was a collaborative effort. Thank you to the New Hampshire congressional delegation, Representative Annie Kuster (a Georgetown alum!), Representative Chris Pappas, and their staff. We appreciate your willingness to experiment and to share.



## Appendix A

# Identifying a SIDE Event Local Support Network

This document describes the ecosystem of people and institutions surrounding a SIDE Event. A SIDE Event is a public field event led by a Member of Congress that brings Stakeholders, Individuals, Data, and Evidence together on a topic of local concern.

**The Institution:** Congress, as the nation’s lawmaking body for national issues. The [House Clerk](#), the [Rules Committee](#), [House Administration](#), and the [Chief Administrative Officer](#) are the offices that maintain institutional infrastructure and regulations. Our pilot was informed by the Clerk’s office in particular.

**Institutional Intermediaries:** Members and district staff.

**Local Pathfinders:** Individuals who understand how the issue is present in the community and who act as resources to convene and create authentic, informed deliberation. These individuals are local residents who maintain an active and inclusive civic network.

**Flashlights:** Individuals who work with the Local Pathfinders in a coordinated way to illuminate the broader policy system view, traverse between national and local implications, translate language or “code switch” and initiate timely actions.

**Community Discussion Facilitator:** Individual who facilitates discussion and can supplement the facilitation skills of members. A facilitator is a great addition especially if the Member wants to focus on just listening and asking questions and not actively moderating.

As you prepare to lead a SIDE Event, plan to understand all of your support personas. What is their role in the process? What are their motivations? What do they need in order to be successful?

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### HELPFUL TIP

Make sure you are monitoring time. If your virtual platform doesn’t have a timing function for participants, someone should be visible with a stopwatch or cue cards.

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### NOTE

Despite all your good community intentions, a “gotcha” personality may be present at your SIDE Event. Sometimes these individuals seek disruption or distraction. Be prepared for this possibility. Also, make sure to request that this individual is aware of the guidelines and ask that he or she take the opportunity to submit written testimony like everyone else.

## Appendix B

# SIDE\* Event Opportunity for Civil Society: Zoom Comes to Congress

*“Civil Society” organizations sit between government and communities to mobilize citizen voice and participation for collective action.*

One of the biggest policy making challenges for Members of Congress in today’s **noisy media environment** is to sort and filter information that is authentic, relevant and representative.

Only Members of Congress can submit information for the record, but they rely on local civil society organizations to provide productive spaces to share information with the community. We’ve provided a **detailed memo** on how to identify a civil society support network for a SIDE Event(s).

If we want a more broadly inclusive policy making process, we must build trusted methods for sharing civic voice and maintaining it as a policy advisory resource. The SIDE Event is such a method. It is an alternative to the popular social media platforms that many of us use to discuss public policy issues. Here’s the problem; Nearly all popular platforms are built for commercial advertising and therefore do not necessarily prioritize social good. Nor do they protect civic voice from monied influence, conspiracy theories and information distortion. Their business models certainly do not facilitate the kind of thoughtful, accessible space necessary for a productive civic discussion.

Information is emerging hour by hour during COVID-19. Like you, Members of Congress are inundated with facts, charts, graphs and maps every day. A SIDE Event is an opportunity to create an intentional space for your Member to hear the constituent “signal” in the noise.

Importantly, on July 27, 2020 all Members of Congress received a license to use the popular Zoom platform for constituent events. In a letter introducing this new technology, the Chief Administrative Officer of Congress noted that Zoom would be available for Members to “conduct meetings and provide a forum for collaboration between Members, staff, constituents, and guests.” Staff will also be able to receive training and support to become

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\* Stakeholders, Individuals, Data and Evidence

proficient on the Zoom platform.

For now, the skills to use Zoom effectively are uneven in Congress, and vary office to office. Civil society organizations with Zoom conferencing skills can help bridge this capacity gap.

This newly opened virtual space on Zoom is ideal for SIDE Events. Civil society will also have a key role in building confidence in this method. If you are a local civil society organization, reach out to your local Member office. Make sure that your Member of Congress and his or her staff see this publication. Suggest a SIDE Event! Convene a “test drive” event using the tools in this playbook: format, guidelines and structured public witness input “for the record.” Invite your local Member and staff. You never know, your Member might be interested in submitting the information for the official record. Ask!

How about a SIDE Event on the local response to COVID-19 and relief funds? You can invite a health worker, a teacher, a front line service worker, the mayor. How about an event that puts forward a positive vision of your community’s future? The possibilities are endless.

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#### NOTE

SIDE Events are curated by Member offices and the number of participants is limited. Our pilot included **7 witnesses plus 35 in the audience** (who also were invited to submit formatted testimony). Similar to committee hearings, SIDE Event discourse is a starting point for more public discussion. You can also consider making a recording publicly available afterward, or available by request. Here is a **sample template** for the submission of public witness testimony. (make sure to allow the latest **Zoom settings** for group document sharing)

## Appendix C

# How To: Identify a Topic for a SIDE Event

This document provides suggestions on how to identify the most successful topics for a SIDE Event. A SIDE Event is a community meeting led by a Member of Congress that brings Stakeholders, Individuals, Data, and Evidence together on a topic of local concern.

One of the most accessible and important parts of the deliberative process of lawmaking is in the early, formative stages of information gathering. The SIDE Event is ideal for gaining a fuller and more informed perspective on an issue. It is also a valuable opportunity for local communities to advise their elected leaders with perspectives, data and context related to an issue under active consideration. From lived experience to expert affiliated knowledge, the SIDE Event provides an opportunity for more civic voice to enter into the information supply chain that ultimately ends up in legislation.

While any issue could be the subject of a SIDE Event, **an ideal topic is one that is of broad concern, but not yet defined as a national policy issue.** In New Hampshire, the issue of groundwater contamination had already garnered a broad swath of interest. The issue was also one that could not ultimately be solved exclusively at the local level, hence Congress' involvement was appropriate. Local land use on public lands would be another example of a topic that is both local and national.

A SIDE Event can also cover a new topic (e.g., digital workforce development).

It can raise the level of civic voice where those impacted are underrepresented because they are not organized as paid stakeholders or don't have lobbyists to raise visibility and explain the local concerns on an issue.

A SIDE Event is also helpful for discussing the local implications of a national/global issue (eg. options for building local resilience to climate change).

## **Ask: What is the civic voice barometer in the district office?**

District offices keep track of many issues. With drop-bys and organized contact campaigns, district staff are on the cutting edge when it comes to contact with all sorts of people who have valuable lived experience or expertise. Many district staff have worked on an issue for years, and in some cases for more than one member, so make sure to ask your colleagues if they can help refine an issue to the history and context of a geographic area, which makes for better representation.

Testimony from a SIDE Event becomes part of the permanent repository of Congress once the Member enters it into the record. It can therefore become a useful, geographically-based trove of topical expertise for policymaking.

## **Ask: Could our office take action on an issue now, creating a balanced discussion and thereby preventing a stalemate later?**

A fast-changing world combined with a full congressional calendar means that issues surge and wane. Thus, staff must be responsive and ready to pivot. Staying informed has always been a challenge, and in today's noisy, accelerated news cycle, that set of responsibilities has become even greater. Our tech and data future promises even more information in the mix. This is why expanding the opportunities for intentional and community authenticated data collection early and upstream in the deliberative process will help our democracy build resilience. It will expand the possible tradeoffs and points of departure to build coalitions. Indeed, most bills that pass both chambers of Congress have the DNA of many earlier bills in them. Any MBA student will tell you that built-in inclusive procedures create more durable outcomes; Congress is no exception.

## **Ask: Do we seem to be getting a lot of local queries or contact about a particular issue?**

The SIDE Event is an intentional deliberative space to create breathing room on an issue. As an exercise in problem definition, it helps a community separate the people from the problem and prevents an "us vs. them"

framework from taking hold.

### **Ask: Is there an opportunity to define this issue in a nonpartisan, problem solving way?**

Aside from gauging an issue from the headlines (is it already a third rail?) and taking into consideration timing (are we in an election zone?) this is a good internal polling question for your colleagues. Members and staff, after all, are experts in framing national issues with a shared local perspective. District staff are particularly skilled at this task as they are “on the ground” receiving constituent queries, giving feedback and taking action. They pay close attention to local concerns and can recognize authentic civic voices. They are your best bet in advising you on whether or not a SIDE Event will be productive.

### **Ask: Is there a recent topical, data-driven report from a local college or university, state agency, or nonprofit organization that would benefit from discussion and more explanation?**

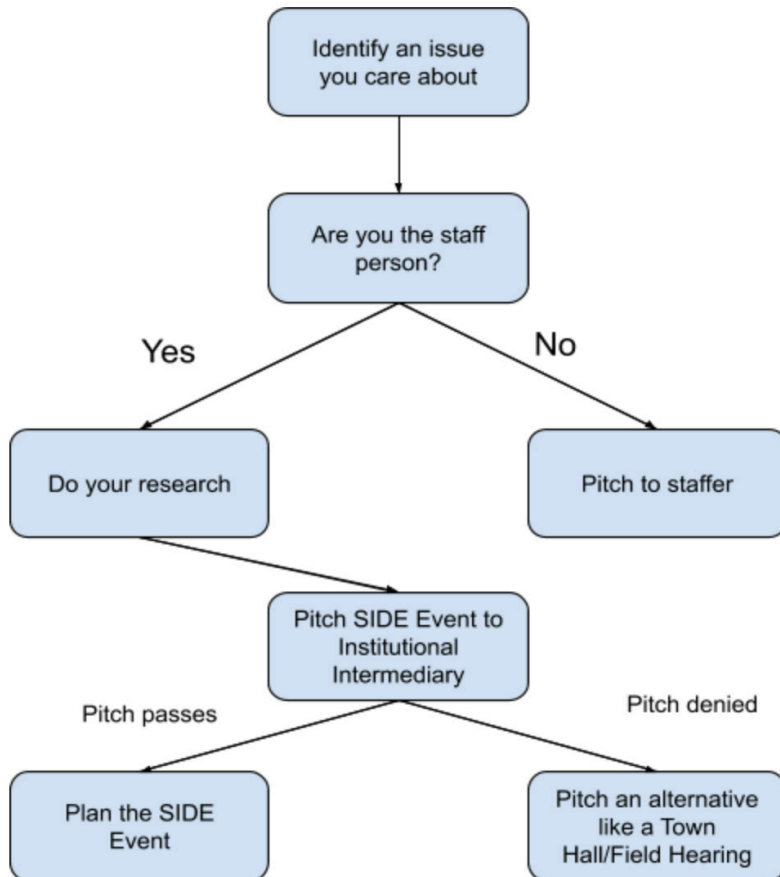
For example, the Carsey School of Public Policy at University of New Hampshire regularly publishes timely policy briefs. This kind of documents provides a credible and local point of departure for discussion. Here is one on [\*\*food security during COVID-19\*\*](#).

### **Ask: Is this issue a mutually hurting stalemate?**

This term denotes a situation where an issue has escalated into two “sides” in a conflict. It is a moment when neither side can win but neither side wants to back down, either. A SIDE Event may provide a window of opportunity to move the issue back into a two-way discussion framework. And, because it is convened by an elected leader or civil society it may provide a “face saving alternative” to de-escalate the conflict and perhaps even regenerate mutual goals.

## Appendix D

# How to Pitch a Member of Congress on Leading a SIDE Event



## Plan Your Pitch

To begin planning a SIDE Event, a staffer will need to know some basics about the issue and the needs and particular methods of your office.

- ▶ How does your office feel about public engagement?
- ▶ Does your Member like to speak at public events?
- ▶ Is the member a good emcee? A moderator? What about the Chief of Staff? It's good to know the comfort level of the Member's office so you can build on strengths and minimize challenges.

### HELPFUL TIP

Things can get complicated! We suggest having both a platform moderator and a technical help person on hand for your online SIDE Event.

## Remember These Points

- ▶ A SIDE Event produces topical information, curated by a Member's district office. The content is facilitated by a structured process and created by constituents in the room.
- ▶ A SIDE Event is a creative new method to bolster the deliberative functions of Congress.
- ▶ It strengthens the connection between the Member and the district and thereby can serve to bolster trust.
- ▶ By going straight to the constituents for information about a topic, it can help filter the signal from the noise in our polarizing media environment.
- ▶ Because it is tagged and entered into the record, it lays the groundwork for community information to be included in the new digital memory of Congress.
- ▶ An added bonus is that because it happens in the district, it builds a more resilient democratic system. If your member is a Constitution buff, remind him or her that it is a great way to strengthen Article One, the representative role of Congress.

## Next Steps/Questions to Ask

- ▶ In your office, whose permission do you need to plan a SIDE Event?
- ▶ Remember to check the Ethics Rules for a refresher. The SIDE Event is member-run, and the method we describe in this case study is within a member's prerogative.
- ▶ Remember that public-serving entities like universities, libraries, local government venues are the easiest to work with for locations to convene in person.
- ▶ How do the D.C. and district office coordinate? Sometimes policy is only done in D.C. sometimes it is shared.
- ▶ Has your office conducted field hearings? What is the feedback?
- ▶ Has your office conducted Town Halls? What is the feedback?
- ▶ What issue(s) will you **pitch for a SIDE** Event?
- ▶ Might you need more than one? If so, plan a series using a roadmap so participants see a consistent theme.



- ▶ Why a SIDE Event? (see above, but add your own words!)
- ▶ Who would you have the Member invite as witnesses to ensure that it is community driven and balanced?
- ▶ How will you ask your “witnesses” to submit testimony? What are the two questions you would ask the audience to answer as their submission of testimony for the record?
- ▶ How will you format and enter the testimony? Here is a [sample](#). We recommended entering it into a committee repository, but you could also have your member enter it in the “e-Hopper” as an extension of remarks. Note the new COVID19 rules for [electronic document submission](#) and [especially for committees](#).
- ▶ Remember, technology regulations for Congress change and evolve. Check with the [Committee on House Admin](#) to learn the latest!
- ▶ If participants have data, ask for the data and attribution to accompany testimony.
- ▶ Where does the issue lie within the committee jurisdictions of the House of Representatives?
- ▶ More broadly (and politically) Whose turf is it?
- ▶ Is your Member on one of the committees of jurisdiction so he or she can enter it into a committee repository? What are alternatives?
- ▶ What does leadership think about this issue?
- ▶ What is the best timing for this convening? (Congressional calendar, weather, deadlines come into play)
- ▶ Is this event online or offline with social distance? Is it hybrid? Where could the SIDE Event convene? (Is it accessible? Is there parking? Is it able to be configured for the SIDE format? Members have been using Zoom and WebEx during COVID19. Some supplement these platforms with Facebook and Twitter live feeds and then put the video up for later viewing.
- ▶ Are there any recent bills introduced on this issue? Any from the past?
- ▶ Are there any [CRS](#), [GAO](#) or [CBO](#) relevant reports?

## Final Thoughts

- ▶ If your member says “yes”, and you’ve decided to convene a SIDE Event, it’s important to understand the institutional and political context of the topic you’ll be deliberating.
- ▶ Using Congress.gov, do some keyword searches to see if and how the issue is present in existing/past legislation.
- ▶ Check with the [Congressional Research Service](#) to see if there are any updates on the topic.
- ▶ Speak to staff members in DC and in the district to learn about the history and political context of the issue. Who has provided authentic and trusted information about it?
- ▶ SIDE Events are curated more than Town Halls, but they are still open events. We are living in a weaponized information environment. Who might send a “gotcha” person to an event? How will your member respond?
- ▶ Would it be helpful to bring in a facilitator from the community?
- ▶ A SIDE Event offers a chance for the Member to moderate, to listen and learn along with the community, or to be an expert. What is the exact role of the Member?
- ▶ What other members would be interested in the outcome of the SIDE Event? Can you send a “Dear Colleague” memo about it?
- ▶ What is the best way to share your office’s experience and outcomes with other members of your state’s delegation, House and Senate?
- ▶ How will you format the statements for the record? This depends on the age of the audience and their facility with digital tools. Don’t worry, hardcopy is also good.
- ▶ What questions will you ask the audience to answer for the record? This will narrow down the submission of information to a manageable level. See our [suggested template](#).
- ▶ Who on committee staff might appreciate knowing about the information gathered at the event?

---

### NOTE

A Committee repository is the information stored by a committee, topical to its hearings and oversight plan. Extension of remarks is information entered into the record of Congress on the House Floor. During COVID19, Members use the “e-Hopper”

## Appendix E

# How to Plan a SIDE Event

This document provides suggestions for various components of a SIDE Event including witnesses, the pilot event run-of-show, and audience. A SIDE Event is a public field event led by a Member of Congress that brings Stakeholders, Individuals, Data, and Evidence together on a topic of local concern.

## Witnesses

The people that we had at the table with the representatives as “witnesses” plus their civic voice attributes in parentheses:

- ▶ A first responder activist, a community firefighter with PFAS exposure
- ▶ A community activist representing Merrimack Citizens for Clean Water: (Merrimack is an area affected by industrial PFAS contamination)
- ▶ An expert academic Professor and Researcher, University of NH Dept. of Civil and Environmental Engineering: (a local scientist working on research studies of PFAS)
- ▶ Association representative from municipal governments, (an individual who can share broader regional perspective re concerns with costs of PFAS cleanup)
- ▶ A state representative (NH State Representative for a contaminated area)
- ▶ A non-governmental advocate working on water issues, NH Safe Water Alliance
- ▶ NH state government Department of Environment, (a commissioner and regulator who could share perspectives about setting health-based standards for PFAS)

## Run of Show

**10:00 A.M.** | Welcome from a town official

**10:05 A.M.** | Introductory remarks from Rep. Annie Kuster

**10:10 A.M.** | Introductory remarks from Rep. Chris Pappas

**10:15 A.M.** | Panel testimony (~4 mins each)

**10:40 A.M.** | Representatives question witnesses – in practice, the members ended up asking questions to the witnesses right after they had testified rather than waiting until the end of all testimony

**11:20 A.M.** | Audience questions

**11:30 A.M.** | Field Hearing ends\*

## Audience

This event was open to the public and we provided rows of chairs for them behind the witness chairs. The audience was also invited to submit testimony for the record based on two topic-specific questions.

## Press Coverage

- ▶ [Local station WMUR](#) aired a piece about the event
- ▶ New Hampshire Union Leader [article](#)
- ▶ Local station WCAX also published a short [article](#)

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### HELPFUL TIP

Find potential audience participants in your constituent mail! Could your Legislative Correspondent create a list of thoughtful, topically interested individuals in the district?

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\* SIDE Event referred to as the more familiar “field hearing” here.

## Appendix E-1

# Run of Show: Sample from the New Hampshire SIDE Event on PFAS

This document describes the run-of-show for a SIDE Event. A SIDE Event is a public field event led by a Member of Congress that brings Stakeholders, Individuals, Data, and Evidence together on a topic of local concern.

**This document is provided courtesy of Rep Annie Kuster (NH, 2) and staff.**

- ▶ Remember, this material is from a pilot, please adapt and modify
- ▶ The Member and staff determine the SIDE Event primary witnesses. This model also allows public attendees (online or in person) to submit testimony. You can create other ways to take questions, for example, with a hashtag on Twitter i.e. #NH SIDE

## New Hampshire PFAS SIDE Event

**Date:** August 13, 2019

**Time:** 1.5 hours (10am - 11:30am ET)

**Location:** Litchfield, Town Hall (During the COVID-19 pause from in person events, please adapt to remote methods using your office's video conferencing platform, this could also be done via a "hybrid" method. [Here is a primer](#) of how Congress is working remotely)

### Witnesses:

In addition to the Representatives, local witnesses included:

- ▶ Activist for firefighter PFAS exposure
- ▶ Clean Water: activist for Merrimack area affected by industrial PFAS contamination
- ▶ Professor and Researcher, UNH Dept. of Civil and Environmental Engineering: scientist working on research studies of PFAS

- ▶ Director, New Hampshire Municipal Association: sharing municipality perspective re concerns with costs of PFAS cleanup
- ▶ NH State Representative for Merrimack
- ▶ NH Safe Water Alliance: activist
- ▶ Assistant Commissioner New Hampshire Department of Environmental Services: regulator perspective sharing about setting health-based regulatory standards for PFAS

## Run of Show

10:00 A.M. | Welcome from town official

10:05 A.M. | Introductory remarks from Rep. Annie Kuster

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10:15 A.M. | Panel testimony (~4 mins each)

10:40 A.M. | Representatives question witnesses – in practice, the members ended up asking questions to the witnesses right after they had testified rather than waiting until the end of all testimony

11:20 A.M. | Audience questions

11:30 A.M. | Field hearing ends\*

## Final Step

### September 26, 2019

Rep. Annie Kuster enters the SIDE Event testimony into the committee record of an Energy and Commerce Subcommittee on Environment and Climate Change markup meeting on Capitol Hill.

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### NOTE

The SIDE Event is called a “Field hearing” in this original “Run of Show.” Even though it is not an official event, more people (and the media) are familiar with the field hearing concept. Please see the SIDE Event resources for ways to describe a SIDE Event — it is an innovation in the traditional deliberative process in order to include more civic voice.

## SIDE Event Information Sheet

Please complete this form electronically by filling in the provided blanks.

### - STAFF ONLY -

DISTRICT(s): use the 4-character abbreviation:

[Member\(s\) name](#) in the Official Record & also the Member [Unique ID](#) from House Clerk:

Is this SIDE Event a supplement to a Committee, Subcommittee, or Caucus?    Yes    No  
If yes, please use the [official name](#), caucuses [here](#).

SIDE Event Topic Tag:

**Today's Date use MM/DD/YYYY**

**Witness Name**

Are you representing yourself or an organization?                      Self                      Organization

If you are representing an organization, please list the entity or entities you are representing.

What is the data, evidence, or experience that has informed your statement? Please note the sources, if applicable.

Please write your statement for the record. Feel free to write your most hoped for outcome.

## Appendix F

# Sample Ground Rules for a Congressional SIDE Event

A SIDE Event is a public gathering led by a Member of Congress that brings Stakeholders, Individuals, Data, and Evidence together on a topic of local concern.

This SIDE Event on \_\_\_\_\_ is an opportunity to reflect the value of civic discourse and an informed deliberative process.

This event is a discussion, not a debate.

Everyone is encouraged to participate, but it is fine to observe and listen.

Please be intentional about this civic opportunity. By choosing to be part of a community activity, you increase the overall resilience of this district and make it better for all of us.

Let's give our community members the benefit of the doubt and assume positive intent. Your neighbors, like yourself, came here today to contribute and gain insight about an issue that impacts everyone.

Please stay on topic and stick to specifics, rather than hypotheticals, as much as possible.

The purpose of this SIDE Event is to hear from individuals, so please refrain from broad political brush strokes or labels. Avoid assigning intentions, beliefs, or motives to others. Speak for yourself.

Criticism is part of productive discourse, as is objection, but please keep in mind that constructive criticism keeps the conversation going.

Clearly distinguish between what you believe to be, on one hand, a fact, and, on the other, anything else (speculation, opinion, attitude, prediction).

Adhere to the same standards of behavior online that you follow in person.

Be respectful. And please be careful about sarcasm and parody. Remember, this is going to be entered into the record as community input. You don't want a humorous reference to be misinterpreted for posterity!

---

### HELPFUL TIP

Please share with participants, ask them to read it beforehand. Insert any COVID19 related guidelines here at the top.



## Appendix G

# House of Representatives: Audio and Video Conferencing Resources for Member Offices

There are a variety of resources House offices can use for audio and video meetings and conferencing.

- ▶ [Microsoft Teams](#)
- ▶ [Cisco Webex](#)
- ▶ [Zoom](#)
- ▶ [House Conference Bridge Services](#)
- ▶ [Verizon Business Instant Meeting Conferencing Services](#)
- ▶ [Additional Resources](#)

## Microsoft Teams

The Microsoft Teams Meetings and Live Events products are federally approved, supported by the Office of the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO), and available at no additional cost to all Members and staff. You can request the [creation of a Microsoft Team via MyServiceRequests](#).

**Team Meetings** (Used for two-way conversations within a group):

- ▶ Provides online audio/video meetings, chat, mobile collaboration, and file sharing for up to 250 participants.
- ▶ Accessible on mobile devices, web browsers, laptops, and desktops.
- ▶ Meetings can be scheduled directly from the Teams application or from Outlook.
- ▶ Meetings can include a feature where participants are able to join meetings from a regular phone line. Please visit the [Using a Conference Line on Teams](#) page for more information.
- ▶ External guests can be added to a Teams meeting for audio/video collaboration and chat.
- ▶ Team meetings can be [recorded and distributed](#) later for participants to view.

### NOTE

Some links in this appendix require House Intranet access.

- ▶ For more information, visit the [Microsoft Teams](#) page

**Team Live Events** (Used for one-way communication and presentations):

- ▶ Enables users to broadcast video and audio and share content for up to 10,000 attendees for events like town halls.
- ▶ Accessible on mobile devices, web browsers, laptops, and desktops.
- ▶ Empowers multiple roles (organizer, producer, presenter, and attendee) to successfully broadcast and participate in an event.
- ▶ Events can be scheduled directly from the Teams application.
- ▶ Delivers chat-based collaboration, live event Q&A, and options for recording and closed captioning.
- ▶ Anyone can join an event with an attendee link.
- ▶ Event hosting is currently supported by the CAO.
- ▶ For more information, see Microsoft's [Plan for live events on Microsoft Teams](#) page.

## Cisco Webex

The Webex Meetings and Events products are federally approved, supported by the Office of the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO), and available at no additional cost in limited quantities for all House offices. For more information, visit the [Cisco Webex](#) page.

**Webex Meetings** (Used for two-way conversations within a group):

- ▶ Web conferencing meetings can be initiated from Outlook.
- ▶ Accessible on mobile devices, web browsers, laptops, and desktops.
- ▶ Allows for audio, video, chat, recorded meetings, and real-time content sharing for up to 1,000 participants.
- ▶ Anyone can join a meeting with an attendee link.
- ▶ Provides registration and attendee information.
- ▶ Cisco Webex Audio can be purchased as an add-on

service.

- ▶ For more information, visit Cisco's [Webex Video Conferencing](#) page.

**Webex Events** (Used for one-way communication, e.g. speakers to an audience):

- ▶ Enables users to broadcast video and audio and share content for up to 3,000 attendees.
- ▶ Accessible on mobile devices, web browsers, laptops, and desktops.
- ▶ Hosts and panelists can mute or unmute attendees, share content of their screen, and promote attendees to be a panelist for enhanced engagement.
- ▶ Allows speakers to interact with participants in real time using polling, chat, and threaded Q&A.
- ▶ Offers invitation-only access to events.
- ▶ Provides event recording options.
- ▶ Provides registration and attendee information, with the ability to send out automated invitations, confirmations, reminders, and follow-ups.
- ▶ Cisco Webex Audio Service can be purchased as an add-on service
- ▶ For more information, visit Cisco's [Webex Events](#) page

## Zoom

**Zoom Meetings** (Used for two-way conversations within a group):

- ▶ Includes interactive chats, file sharing, and screen sharing for up to 1,000 participants.
- ▶ Provides polling features.
- ▶ Includes the ability to provide closed captioning.
- ▶ Provides meeting recording options.
- ▶ Accessible on mobile devices, web browsers, laptops, and desktops.
- ▶ For more information, visit Zoom's [Meetings](#) page.

**Zoom Webinars** (Used primarily for one-way communication, e.g. speakers to an audience):

- ▶ Enables users to broadcast video and audio and share content for up to 10,000 event participants.
- ▶ Hosts and panelists can mute or unmute attendees, share content of their screen, and promote attendees to be a panelist for enhanced engagement.
- ▶ Includes the ability to provide closed captioning.
- ▶ Provides meeting recording options.
- ▶ Accessible on mobile devices, web browsers, laptops, and desktops.
- ▶ For more information, visit Zoom's [Webinars](#) page.

## House Conference Bridge Services

Available at **no cost** to your office

CAO Telecommunications offers conference phone lines that host up to 20 conference participant lines. To have a Conference Bridge set up for your next meeting, contact the Telecommunications team at **202-226-5101**.

## Verizon Business Instant Meeting Conferencing Services

Instant Meeting Audio Conferencing hosts conference phone lines that host 21 participants or more. For information on pricing and setup, contact the Telecommunications team at **202-226-5101**.

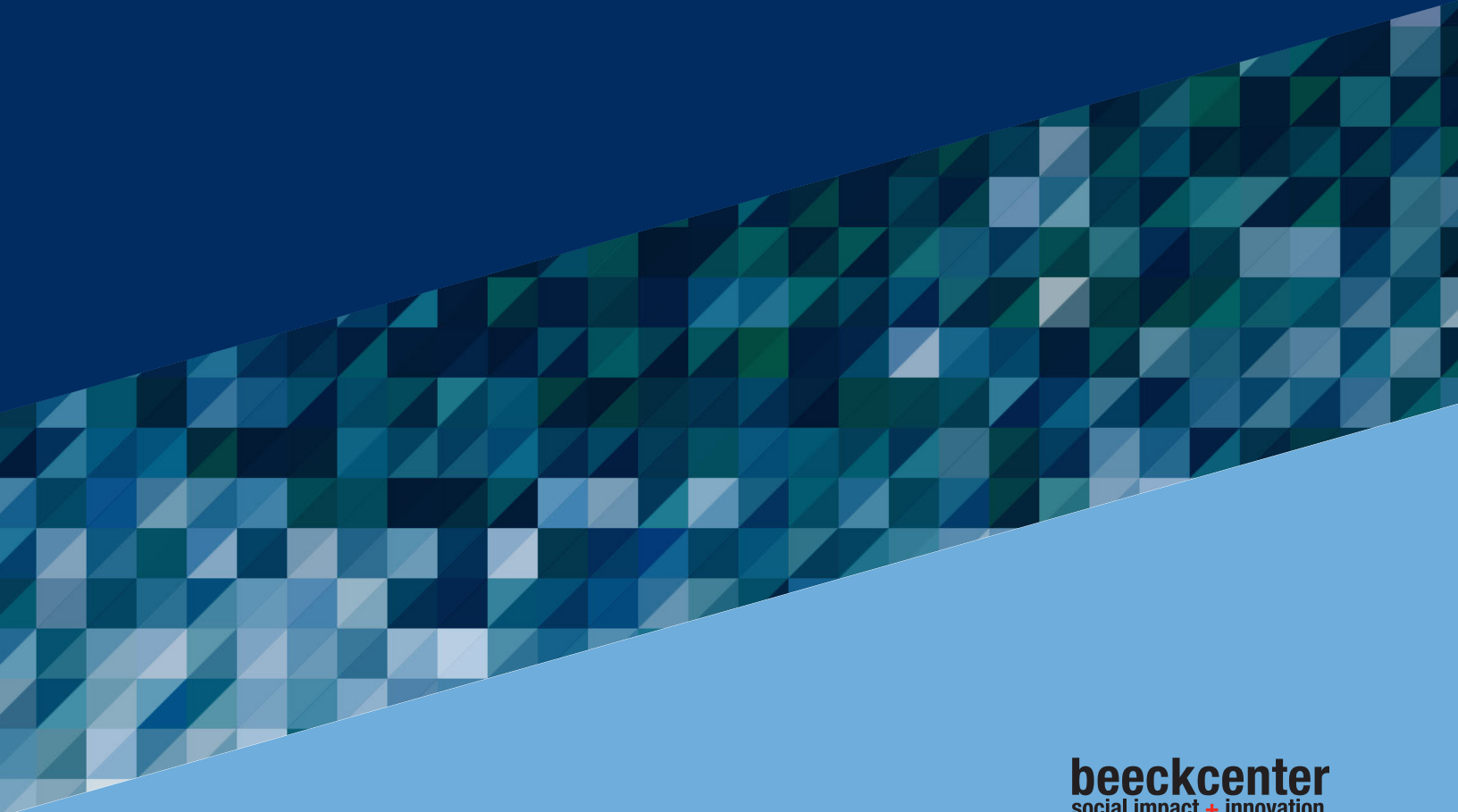
## Cybersecurity

Worried about cybersecurity? We are too! The National Security Agency has created a [document](#) with helpful cyber security guidance when considering collaborative platforms.

## Additional Resources

Additional authorized cloud conferencing options can be found on the [Cloud Services](#) page.

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