
MEMORANDUM OF SUPPORT Disability Inclusion in Public Bodies Meetings

Taconic Resources for Independence, Inc. (TRI) was founded in 1986 and is Dutchess County's leading disability advocacy organization, dedicated to empowering persons with disabilities to lead self-directed lives in the community. TRI works within the community to provide disability awareness and advocacy for the removal of barriers.

TRI strongly supports the Executive budget proposal and Senate's amending language to provide for virtual meeting flexibility under the Open Meetings Law (OML) to public bodies organized for disability matters, and for officials with disabilities to count in quorums for all public meetings if they are attending remotely.

As part of the Governor's emergency declaration at the beginning of the pandemic, exemptions made to OML allowed public bodies meetings to be held via videoconferencing. This emergency action allowed everyone to participate remotely.

The declaration allowed people with disabilities to more fully participate because most physical barriers and other constraints were removed in these virtual spaces. It increased civic engagement by a population that has historically been excluded from government – an important advance for the civil rights of our community.

This policy of greater inclusion for people with disabilities must continue. While the current proposal largely impacts public bodies with a focus on disability, it serves as a starting point to make other significant changes that will increase civic engagement by people with disabilities and all New Yorkers. Ultimately, those changes should include making hybrid meetings the standard for all government bodies, along with increased use of American Sign Language and other accessibility accommodations at public meetings.

As an important first act, these straightforward changes should move forward as part of the 2023-2024 budget agreement to ensure the civil rights of people with disabilities, who still face major barriers to access. **TRI urges adoption of the Senate's OML budget proposal as included in Article VII (S.4008-B), Part X (see below).**

Senate Article VII Proposals (S.4008-B): PART X -- The Senate modifies the Executive proposal to provide flexibility under the Open Meetings Law (OML) to public bodies organized for disability matters by advancing language to specify which public bodies would be able to host fully-virtual open meetings, link the term "individuals with disabilities" to the existing parameters set by Human Rights Law, and allow for individuals with disabilities to be counted toward a quorum under the existing hybrid OML system (S.1525--see <https://legislation.nysenate.gov/pdf/bills/2023/S1525>) Amending Section 1. Subdivision 3 of section 103-a of the public officers law [OML], as added by section 2 of part WW of chapter 56 of the laws of 2022, is amended to read as follows: 3. The in person participation requirements of paragraph (c) of subdivision two of this section shall not apply to (a) public bodies organized for the express purpose of performing a governmental function related to issues specific to individuals with disabilities.