



Public Hearings during the pandemic: what you need to know

As committed advocates, even a pandemic won't stop us from making our voices heard on the issues that matter to our communities right now.

Now that the legislature is almost fully remote and virtual, we must find creative ways to educate legislators about bills that will have big impacts on the lives of low-income people in Maine.

If you would like to participate in a public hearing of the Maine legislature in 2021, we hope this information will help.

The legislative session will likely run from January to June. The Legislature holds public hearings on different legislation during the session.

What is a public hearing?

- A legislative *public hearing* is a step in the process of a bill becoming a law. Legislative committees are a small group of Maine Senators and Representatives that listens to testimony from both sides of the issue at the public hearing.

Our goal at a public hearing:

- To persuade the legislative committee to vote in favor of a bill that will have a positive impact or against a bill that will have a harmful impact.
- To make the case for health care, rental assistance, unemployment supports and pandemic relief for all in Maine, including immigrants and others who are unable to get the help they need.
- To ensure racial equity is considered by committee members and prioritized when they make their decision about a bill.
- To counter opponents' arguments against our legislative effort
- Many public hearings are covered in the media, so this is also a chance to get our message out to the wider public.

Here are the steps to participating in a public hearing in 2021:

Step 1: Know your bill: Work with Maine Equal Justice to identify the Legislative Document number (LD#) for the bill you want to follow this legislative session.

[Maine Equal Justice legislative agenda.](#)

Click here for a [full list of bill titles](#).

Click here to download [weekly legislative reports, which indicate the bills that are printed each week](#). The legislature is expected to consider roughly 1,500 bills this session, though some may be considered next year.

Step 2: Find out when the public hearing is being held and how to register as a participant:

Once a bill has been printed, you can use its “LD” number to look up its status, including whether it has been scheduled for a public hearing here: <http://legislature.maine.gov/LawMakerWeb/search.asp>

Upcoming public hearings and work sessions:
<https://legislature.maine.gov/bills/phwkSched.html>

You will need to email the committee clerk directly to get the link to register for the public hearing. Their contact info can be found on their committee page: <http://legislature.maine.gov/committee/#Committees>

Step 3: Who should join a public hearing? The public is welcome! Help us spread the word about the public hearing to others who care. *People whose lives are directly affected by the bill are the most important voices legislators can hear from.* It is also important to have family members of those who are impacted weigh in, as well as advocates and allies to help define the problem and solutions needed.

Step 4: Prepare for the hearing:

Learn about the committee that will hear the testimony.

It can help to know which legislators are on the committee ahead of time, what districts they represent and what, if anything, we know about them and what they care about. This can help you make a connection with them in your testimony. Going into a public hearing with an understanding of your audience can be helpful to your cause.

Step 5: Testify at the hearing

Public hearings will be held via Zoom Webinar.

To register to provide testimony on zoom or via a toll-free phone number, you will need to contact the committee clerk using the [committee email address](#). The clerk will share a zoom link so you can register for the hearing and then use that link to sign on when the hearing starts. **This must be done *at least 30 minutes before the hearing starts.***

We have heard that this process is temporary and an online system to register for public hearings is coming soon.

How to join:

On the day of the hearing, you will join the webinar as an attendee (with your camera and microphone off). When it is time for you to deliver your testimony, you will be “promoted” by the committee staff who are running the Zoom to a panelist. As a panelist, you will have the ability to turn on your camera and microphone so that you can deliver your testimony.

The Committee Chairs will start the hearing by introducing the Committee. Legislators who sponsor the bill testify first. Then the public will be invited to testify, often starting with those in support and then those against.

At the hearing, you don’t need to read exactly what you write. You will have **3 minutes** to speak, but there is no limit on the length of written testimony that you submit. Testimony from the public tends to be one to two pages long. One of the chairs of the committee will watch the time and will ask you to wrap up if you take longer than 3 minutes. You may want to practice reading your testimony out loud and see how long it takes so you know what you can say in 3 minutes.

Written testimony is still posted through the [testimony portal](#), and legislators will be better able to follow along if you have submitted testimony prior to the hearing.

If you need Maine Equal Justice to help you with this step, please let us know.

More information on developing testimony below

When it's your turn to speak:

When you are invited to speak, make sure you are off mute on your end. To help the Committee focus on your words, try to testify in a spot in your home where you have a reliable internet connection, and as little background noise and visual distraction as possible. You can blur your background to preserve your privacy.

Greet the committee and introduce yourself like this: *“Senator Claxton, Representative Meyer, and honorable members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services: my name is _____, I live in (town or city) _____ and I am here today to testify in favor of LD _____.”*

Then you share your testimony. After you are finished, you can offer to answer questions if you are comfortable. Committee members will have the chance to ask clarifying questions. It is always OK to say you don't know the answer. You can offer to get the committee the information after the hearing. Maine Equal Justice can help you do this.

On the day of the hearing, Maine Equal Justice staff will set up an online chat space so we can communicate throughout the hearing.

Questions? Call or Text Kate at 207-754-1489 or text Ambureen at 207-350-5081.

Step 6: Submitting testimony:

Whether you attend the hearing or not, you can submit testimony through the online portal found on the Maine Legislature's website. When submitted this way, it is automatically distributed to members of the committee via email. The online submission form can be found here:

<https://www.mainelegislature.org/testimony/>

Here's an example of how testimony can be structured:

1. **Introduction:** *“Senator Claxton, Representative Meyer, and honorable members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services: my name is _____, I am a resident of _____ and I am here today to testify in favor of _____.”*
2. **Key messages:** Pick one or two -- just one sentence on each.
3. **Story:** Tell a story that illustrates your main point.
4. **Closing:** Reinforce your key message (again, just a sentence) and thank the committee.

These are the important things to remember:

1. The best way to get your point across is to **share your story**. The committee will hear plenty of facts and figures from policy and legal “experts”. We need to show them the human impact of this policy.
2. You have **3 minutes to speak**, and the time goes by fast! You *really* only have time to say your key message and tell a story to illustrate your point.
3. **You are making a difference!** The legislature must act boldly this year to address economic justice and racial equity in Maine. We have heard from many legislators over the years that people who come to testify have a huge impact on the outcome of legislation. You have a powerful story to share that can support policies that help thousands of Mainers. Your voice matters.

Step 7: After the hearing Send a thank you email to committee members reinforcing the key points you made in your testimony. Work with Maine Equal Justice staff to follow up with key legislators to make sure there is a strong vote on your bill.