**Tips & Strategies for Shifting to Online Advocacy Days—and Beyond!**

The current COVID-19 epidemic is dramatically changing how DC functions, especially when it comes to in-person advocacy events. But canceling those meetings is just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the impact on your advocacy program. We’ve outlined some immediate, medium and long-term approaches that may help you keep your program alive as well as the lessons we’ve already learned from each.

# Immediate (for those who’ve had to cancel fly-ins)

## Convert your in-person event to a [**dial-in fly-in**](https://www.advocacyassociates.com/cancelled-event-package).

Based on the couple hundred dial-in meetings we’ve done so far, we’ve found that both advocates and Congressional staff are willing and eager to convert what had been their in-person meetings to “virtual.” If you’re considering doing so, here are some strategies:

* **Keep it Simple (for now)**:
	+ Simple host-less teleconferencing, with no video or other bells and whistles, worked best. We used StartMeeting, which provided us with individual lines for each meeting.
	+ For small events you can make it even simpler by eliminating access codes. For larger events, however, this can cause capacity problems with the telecommunications network.
	+ If you must use a system that includes an access code, it’s essential to be sure advocates know how to use it and, in particular, aren’t confused by the “if you’re the host enter \*” messages.
	+ Be sure to choose a teleconference service that offers a Voice Over Internet Protocol option, as some advocates will be able to use that.
* **Advocate preparation**: Along those lines, advocate preparation is essential to a successful event.
	+ Have a specific session on how to access a teleconference service. This includes what to expect when dialing in. For example, a conference call with an access code often won’t start until two people are on the line and advocates can be confused by that. They also need to know how to mute themselves, especially with large calls.
	+ Be sure to have a leader for each call.
	+ Offer “what to know before you call” and “what to do after you’ve called” webinars with a focus on delivering messages on the phone.
* **Capacity, Capacity, Capacity**. The nation’s teleconferencing system has been pushed to its limit. The following may help mitigate problems:
	+ Get as many advocates as you can to use the conference service’s app for VOIP.
	+ Have as many staff as you can available to help facilitate getting calls started.
	+ Review your schedule list by time and focus on smaller groups, specifically one-to-one calls to be sure they’re connecting to each other.

# Medium Term

## Keeping Engaged Through Local Visits

If you’re not able to shift to a virtual event, consider holding your meetings at the local level in the Summer and Fall. Here are some tips for successful events.

* Pick one day or, at most, a week. This will dramatically narrow the amount of time you’ll spend trying to coordinate schedules.
* Don’t focus on recess periods. Although advocates prefer meeting with the legislator him or herself, their time will be extremely limited and meeting with local staff is generally more effective than meeting with the legislator.
* When registering advocates, provide them with the list of local office locations and ask them to choose which ones are most accessible for them. This will help you avoid considerable time and effort in using GIS mapping to get the right advocates to the right place as the same time.
* Have a system in place for having advocates actively affirm their attendance at the meetings. We find there’s a higher rate of attrition with these meetings.

# Long Term

## Online Learning

Finally, no matter how long the crisis lasts, you’ll need to keep your advocates’ skills sharp. Online learning is one way to do that. If you go that route, consider the following:

* **Provide Multiple Formats**: You’ll need to have various options for those who are going to struggle with online as well as those who are “digital native.” These options include asynchronous, where people take classes at their own pace without leader interaction (see [www.advocacyclassroom.com](http://www.advocacyclassroom.com) for examples); synchronous, where everyone joins together at the same time with an instructor; and, hybrid, where everyone takes the course at their own pace with instructor feedback on their work.
* **Consider a Mini-Certification:** Put together a two to three class certificate program. Classes can include: understanding the policy issues, advocacy 101, “train the trainer,” building relationships, creating advocacy campaigns and building advocacy networks.
* **Gamification:** Set up an online or app-based system that allows advocates to review “bite-sized” snippets of information, followed by a short quiz with badges and other “prizes” as they move through the course. Include both policy-specific information, as well as the details on how to be an effective advocate. Ask us for more details!