

NCDIT Public Access and Participation Plan for North Carolina

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Introduction

The North Carolina Department of Information Technology (NCDIT) recognizes that all citizens of North Carolina have the right to access government services, to meaningfully contribute to government decisions, and to share equitably in the benefits of a prosperous North Carolina. We understand our role as an agency is to foster a culture that leverages technology for an equitable, prosperous, healthier, and educated North Carolina and enables trusted business-driven solutions that meet the needs of our residents. However, we also acknowledge that there is more that we can do to reach communities across the state who may be unaware of and underserved by our programs. This includes communities of color, Indigenous communities, and low-and moderate-income communities. Consequently, it is necessary for these communities to be more meaningfully engaged as partners and stakeholders in government decision-making.

At the same time, building a more inclusive society affects and requires the participation of all North Carolinians. We have developed this initial “Public Access and Participation Plan” to better understand where gaps exist, and to encourage greater participation across the state in all areas of our programs and operations.

Improved outreach and public engagement will be critical for NCDIT to be successful in meeting our mission. Our priority is to serve all the citizens of our state. To this end, our initial Public Access and Participation Plan includes the commitment to:

- Increase agency staff awareness and sensitivity to the value of incorporating the perspectives of underserved populations — especially from communities that have been overlooked or underrepresented — in agency activities and decision-making, through internal training;
- Develop staff facilitation capacity to improve meaningful public participation in agency public meetings;
- Develop staff capacity to represent the agency to the public and to be responsive to citizens who contact our agency seeking help;
- Revisit and redesign the ways that the public accesses the agency, to increase transparency and better enable meaningful participation; and
- Adopt means of measuring success in public access and participation and incorporating lessons learned through public engagement, to ensure continuous improvement in these efforts.

Part 1: Public Meetings

Public meetings are central to the public’s access to agency decision-makers, and to facilitate greater public understanding of agency plans and actions. They are an opportunity for agencies to engage communities whose opinions, for many reasons, have been overlooked. An agency relies on the exchange of information to provide a comprehensive view of agency proposals and to get a sense of the community’s views on related challenges and benefits of agency plans or actions.

The public meetings that NCDIT regularly conducts include the IT Strategy Board, N.C. 911 Board, N.C. Geographic Information Coordinating Council, and N.C. Health Information Exchange Authority Advisory Board. In addition, the Division of Broadband and Digital Equity conducts various public meetings with local municipalities and stakeholders to make them aware of infrastructure and digital equity grants programs. That public interface is expected to grow as the team plans public town halls with various state legislators. As the new Office of Digital Equity and Literacy builds out its digital literacy resources website and array of programs, it will be critical to engage the public, especially in communities of color, Indigenous communities, and low-and moderate-income communities.

To improve public engagement and access, NCDIT shall:

- Review existing practices governing the conduct of agency public meetings, and adopt new practices to promote greater access and meaningful public engagement;
- Engage in community outreach to inform this work;
- Consult with sister agencies that may have done this already; and
- Adopt the goal of ongoing improvement of public access and public participation.

In its review of existing practices governing the conduct of public meetings, the agency shall take the following actions to remediate barriers to participation:

Timing: Adopting timing of informal public meetings at different hours of the day and days of the week to increase the likelihood of getting more representative participation.

Notice: Adopting discretionary notice practices that exceed statutory or regulatory minimum requirements for public input opportunities.

Publicity: Publicizing liberally using various media to promote meeting attendance.

Outreach Intermediaries: Engage with diverse community-based stakeholders to increase awareness and inform the mission and programs of NCDIT.

Supporting the ability of intermediaries to assist with reducing barriers associated with the need for childcare and transportation.

Venues: In addition to providing virtual meeting locations, adopting a variety of locations in neighborhoods whose populations are predominantly Black, Indigenous, Latino, or people of color, and who have an average income below the state's average, and in rural locations across the state.

Ensuring that venues are physically accessible and provide basic amenities.

Languages: Providing translation in American Sign Language and the top two spoken languages of a community, as determined by the most recent census.

Additional Incentives: Considering motivating attendance by providing guest speakers or other incentives.

Non-Technical Information: Providing relevant information and data to the public that is accessible to a non-technical audience.

Varied Means of Input: Providing multiple means of public input, augmenting in-person and virtual meetings, to include telephone, email, online comment portals, surveys, polls, and other means.

Division leaders are authorized to make meeting facilitation training available to staff. (See Part 3: Staff Training)

Part 2: Plan Elements for Website Improvement

Just as the public will benefit from improvements to the ways that NCDIT conducts public meetings, website visitors will be able to engage more fully if NCDIT improves access to its digital presence and resources. Making sure NCDIT websites are designed with a focus on user experience will increase traffic and engagement and improve the public's understanding of agency goals and activities.

The agency will:

- Review all website language describing agency policies, programs and processes, and, where necessary, update content with clear, plain-language statements;
- Engage in community outreach to inform this work;
- Consult with sister agencies that have taken steps to improve access to their websites; and
- Consider securing the assistance of website specialists.

In its review, the agency shall address the following barriers:

Non-Technical Information: Conveying information that is clear and accessible. Even technical information should be set out in a non-technical manner.

Languages: Publishing website content in the two most common languages spoken in the state as determined by the most recent census.

Varied Means of Input: Making available multiple methods for the public to provide input through the website and otherwise. This could include telephone, email, general comment portals and other means.

NCDIT will appoint staff to serve as “environmental justice liaisons” for the agency. These staff can be subject matter experts. Alternatively, they can be intermediaries between agency subject matter experts and the public. The agency will post their names, email addresses and telephone numbers on the website so the public has ready access to their help.

Part 3: Staff Training

To build staff appreciation of the barriers faced by communities whose residents are Black, Indigenous, Latino, or people of color, and to be better prepared to make agency processes more open to these communities, NCDIT staff will participate in training starting in the fall of 2022.

There will be two types of training. First, to create greater sensitivity to the challenges that many communities face, staff should hear from community members regarding the barriers they face in accessing government services and engaging with state agencies. Trainings should also explore principles that will help illustrate why it is critically important for the agency to endeavor to be more inclusive. Reviewing and understanding the Jemez Principles for Democratic Organizing or the International Association of Public Participation’s Core Values for Public Participation could provide a useful starting point for staff training.

Meeting facilitation is a second important element of agency training that certain staff should undertake this year. While many agencies may have high-profile cases that are contentious and would require the engagement of mediation and dispute resolution professionals, most agency meetings will not. Well-trained staff should be capable of organizing and conducting most informal agency meetings. Basic facilitation skills can ensure that public meetings run smoothly and that agencies and the public get the most out of them. The agency will identify specific staff who can first learn basic public facilitation skill, and then use their understanding to teach their colleagues.

Part 4: Ongoing Improvement of Public Access and Participation

NCDIT’s adoption of a Public Access and Participation Plan is an important step in our commitment to developing a more accessible and responsive state government. However, this is a first step, and there needs to be a process that will ensure continued improvement of the plan. Responsible oversight will ensure that the plan not only is producing the results that the agency is seeking, but that it is able to demonstrate that.

As with any administrative program, a formal plan such as this will be a complex undertaking. The initial plan will undoubtedly benefit from ongoing review and the adoption of improvements to its initial design and implementation process. Planning for periodic comprehensive review will help ensure this.

To this end, NCDIT will undertake a program review within two years of this plan's initial implementation, and within every two years after that, to ensure that it is promoting public access and participation.

Review should be organized and facilitated in a manner that encourages representation from diverse stakeholders, ensuring equitable opportunities for participation, without requiring formal intervention or representation by an attorney.

Basic components of program review will include, at a minimum, consideration of:

1. Plan impacts: a demonstration that the agency is providing opportunities for meaningful public participation.
2. Plan success: whether the plan has been successful in meeting its goals of being more inclusive and, specifically, whether agency actions are reflecting this engagement by incorporating viewpoints of historically disenfranchised communities in North Carolina.
3. Future improvements relevant circumstances and issues that the agency and public determine should inform the specific focus that the review would take and be incorporated into program review.

Appendix: Agency Mission and Equity Statement

Mission and Equity Statement

NCDIT is dedicated to helping the citizens of North Carolina leverage technology for an equitable, prosperous, healthier, and educated North Carolina. We are committed to enabling trusted business-driven solutions that meet the needs of North Carolinians.

NCDIT needs to effectively engage North Carolina's diverse residents and businesses to fulfill our core purpose of serving all citizens of our state. By becoming a more diverse, equitable and inclusive organization, we will be better equipped to expand our reach and more effectively deliver services such as broadband connectivity and digital equity, cybersecurity and privacy, and digital transformation for our state.