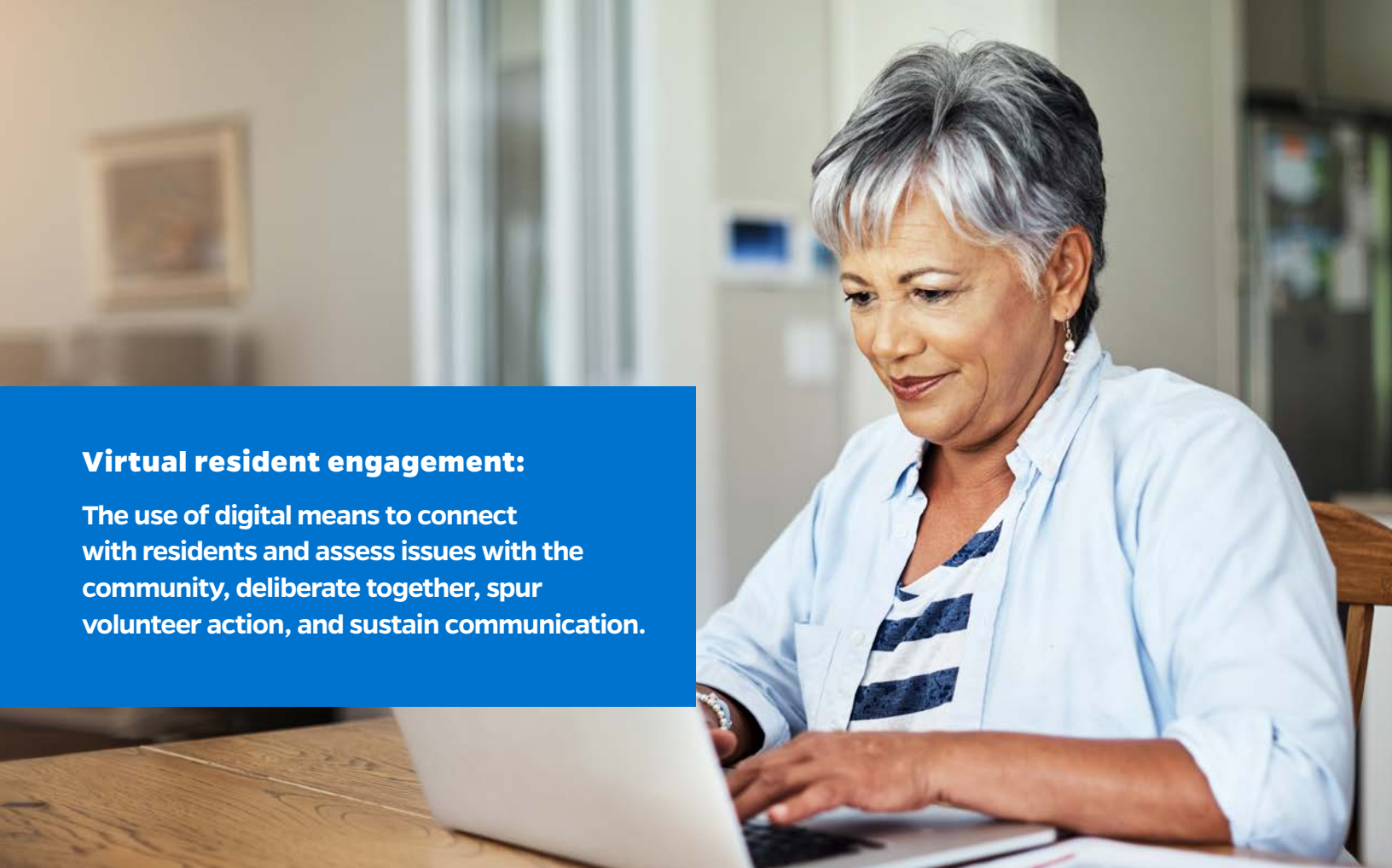




A Practical Guide to Engaging Volunteers Aged 50+ Online



Virtual resident engagement:

The use of digital means to connect with residents and assess issues with the community, deliberate together, spur volunteer action, and sustain communication.

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated a dramatic shift in American communities towards virtual resident engagement. As organizations consider how to adapt to this increasingly digital landscape, local leaders have an opportunity to understand the needs of community members and design online engagement strategies that are effective and accessible to all.

Local leaders across the country strive every day to engage residents equitably and in a way that accurately represents the population, includes the voices and expertise of historically marginalized communities, and is sustainably undertaken. As the population of adults aged 50+ in the U.S. grows, it is also increasingly important for city leaders to design engagement efforts that include the perspectives, talents, and skills of older adults. Virtual engagement presents openings to meet these challenges as well as new obstacles to overcome.

This guide is based on research done by Public Agenda, as well as insights gained by Cities of Service and AARP while engaging residents online during the COVID-19 pandemic. Since 2009, Cities of Service has helped cities engage residents to solve problems. Our engagement model brings city leaders together with residents to identify and assess priority challenges, deliberate with the community, take action, and demonstrate impact to encourage ongoing participation.

PURPOSE:

This guide will help city leaders, staff, and partners engage residents with intentional and well-designed virtual engagement efforts that:

- increase access,
- ensure security and privacy,
- expand representation,
- strengthen deliberation, and
- sustain ongoing action and communication.

WHO THIS GUIDE IS FOR:

This guide is for practitioners of resident engagement, including city leaders and staff, as well as nonprofits and other organizations that work closely with city government, with a particular focus on engaging community members aged 50 and over.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE:

We've constructed this guide to help practitioners:

- 1.** assess the issues they wish to address with residents,
- 2.** deliberate with the community, and
- 3.** take action and sustain communication.

This guide will help practitioners think through this process when applying a virtual engagement strategy. We have included tips to help practitioners engage diverse audiences in their communities, especially those aged 50 and older.



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Learn more about how local leaders and residents can build more vibrant cities, towns, and neighborhoods for people of all ages in this joint publication from Cities of Service and AARP: [Engaging the Community to Create Community](#).

- PAGE 5** **Challenges and opportunities** presented by virtual engagement to help you design your virtual engagement activities.
- PAGE 8** **Key questions** to ask yourself as you design your initiative.
- PAGE 9** **Best practices** to ensure your activities are accessible to the entire community and address common privacy and security concerns.
- PAGE 15** **Tools and techniques** to promote engagement for each step of the process, including assessment, deliberation, action, and communication.

CHALLENGES

Overcoming Fears and Increasing Access

Engaging residents online presents certain challenges that should be kept in mind when designing virtual engagement initiatives.

LACK OF ACCESS AMONG OLDER ADULTS

Those who lack both high-speed internet service and a smartphone are disproportionately likely to be from certain segments of the population. Notably, 40% of Americans ages 65 and older lack high-speed internet. While nearly 80% of adults aged 50 and older use a smartphone, that percentage falls to 62% of those aged 70 and older.¹ In contrast, 92% of

those aged 18-49 use smartphones. Additionally, fewer Black and Hispanic Americans have high-speed internet at home than White Americans, and while more than 90% of Americans with incomes over \$75,000 have high-speed internet access at home, this drops to 72% for those between \$49,000 and \$30,000, and 56% below \$30,000.²

FEARS ABOUT DATA AND ONLINE PRIVACY

For good reason, residents are often hesitant to share personal information because they do not know who their data will be shared with and how it will be used. They may be less likely to participate in activities that require them to log in to a service or register.

This concern is more pronounced among older adults: only 14% are extremely or very confident in online privacy, while 40% are somewhat confident and another 48% are not very or not at all confident.³

COVID-19

COVID-19 has amplified some of these connectivity challenges. The pandemic has prevented in-person gatherings that local governments have traditionally used to engage the public. In addition, social media

and email are severely limited in their reach: only 18% of older adults follow government accounts, for example.⁴ The result is that it can be difficult for city leaders to reach a large number of their community members online.

¹“2020 Tech Trends of the 50+.” Nelson Kakulla. Brittne. Washington, DC: AARP Research, January 2020. <https://doi.org/10.26419/res.00329.001>

² “Internet/Broadband Fact Sheet.” Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C. (April 7, 2021) <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/fact-sheet/internet-broadband/#who-is-smartphone-dependent>. ibid

³ “2020 Tech Trends of the 50+.” Nelson Kakulla. Brittne. Washington, DC: AARP Research, January 2020. <https://doi.org/10.26419/res.00329.001>

⁴ibid

OPPORTUNITIES

Expanding and Deepening Engagement

Despite these challenges, when done thoughtfully, virtual engagement offers opportunities to expand and deepen engagement with local communities.

EXPANDING REPRESENTATION

Most city officials know that a lack of resources, as well as historical neglect and marginalization, makes building connections with members of some communities a challenge that requires intentionality. This is especially true in communities where lower incomes mean that lack of access to transportation or childcare present major obstacles to participation. Due to these barriers, the community members who are most impacted by the topic and the interventions planned are often absent from deliberation and problem-solving discussions.

Virtual engagement efforts can help overcome some of these obstacles. For example, residents can attend online meetings without the need for additional childcare or transportation. Additional outreach, training, resources, and well-designed engagement activities can address barriers to virtual participation—such a lack of access to technology and unfamiliarity with online platforms—and allow city officials to expand representation of those whose voices are most needed.

STRENGTHENING DELIBERATION

City leaders are well-versed in gathering input, generating ideas, and supporting resident action through engagement techniques like surveys, interviews, academies, and participation in traditional groups like boards and commissions. Virtual engagement techniques provide

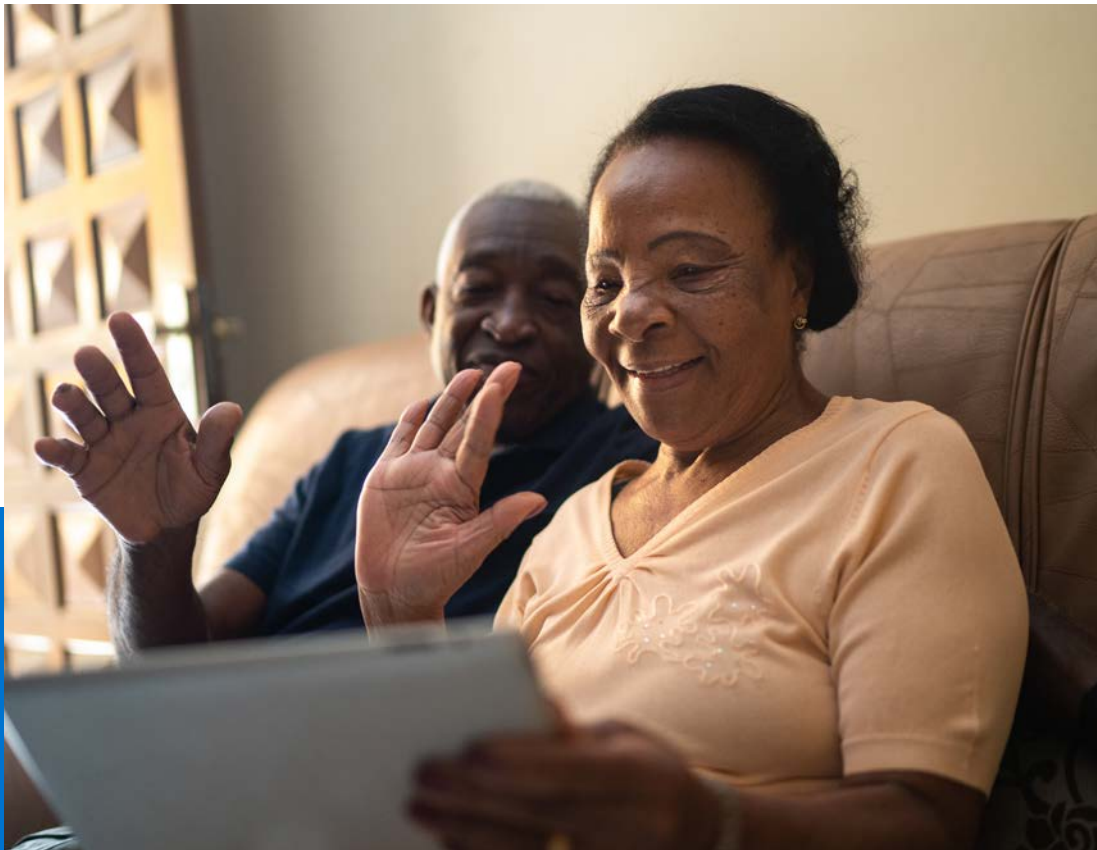
these city leaders with new ways to encourage deeper deliberation, during which residents learn about issues from various points of view, work through tensions, and develop and assess solutions in order to choose those with most benefit for all.

Deeper virtual engagement has the potential to foster to conversations across differences, which can lead to better solutions.

SUSTAINING ONGOING ACTION AND COMMUNICATION

Solving complex challenges requires a number of partners, including residents. Each of those partners typically has their own needs assessments, studies, and potential solutions. Often these resources are not cohesively collected but instead community members must find time to read various reports, attend numerous meetings, and

talk to different staff in hopes of understanding the city's strategy. This can leave residents frustrated and disconnected. With sustained, intentional engagement and communication tied to a larger strategy, residents can more effectively tackle important local problems.



Virtual engagement tools and well-designed volunteer activities, both virtual and in-person, can ensure that the efforts of residents impact important problems and that residents remain connected, informed, and engaged in the long-term.

BEFORE YOU BEGIN: KEY QUESTIONS

Virtual engagement techniques are only as good as the preparation done before implementation.

We have prepared a set of questions that you should answer prior to employing any virtual engagement techniques. These questions will ensure that you have clear goals, a defined plan, and that your efforts will make an impact on problems that are a priority for the community and the city.

WHO

- are we trying to reach?
- should be facilitating and managing the virtual engagement tool(s)?
- will have access to data, and for what purpose(s)?
- should be involved in the design, implementation, and assessment of this virtual engagement initiative?

WHAT

- are the goals for this virtual engagement?
- principles —such as equity and transparency—will be followed as the virtual engagement strategy and tools are chosen?
- might prevent those we want to engage from participating?
- resources do we need in order to ensure inclusive and equitable participation with the virtual engagement initiative?
- will follow up and communication look like during and after the virtual engagement?
- virtual engagement tools align with our goals, as well as inclusion and equity commitments?

BEST PRACTICES

4 Ways to Increase Access

As you design your initiative, keep in the mind the barriers to access that residents might face. These may include lack of knowledge, technological skills and awareness of engagement opportunities, as well as access to equipment, software, and high-speed internet that are required to engage online. Barriers are also presented to people whose primary language is not English and people with disabilities.

There are several ways cities can overcome these barriers, including the following four steps:

1

START WITH A FAMILIAR PLATFORM TO OVERCOME KNOWLEDGE BARRIERS

Sometimes the best way to get less tech-savvy audiences engaged digitally is to start with familiar platforms or software and then introduce more complex features later on. This might mean starting with certain frequently used tools and gradually integrating tools with more features and complexity (to the extent they can help you achieve your goals).

For example, Facebook makes an excellent starting place for older adults. Of all social media platforms, it is by far the most popular with people in the 50+ community: 63% of adults aged 50 and older use Facebook.⁵ You may wish to begin engagement using Facebook Live or other tools that easily integrate with Facebook rather than tools that require additional software and training. Other familiar platforms cities can employ include texting and phone calls.

In cities like South Bend, Indiana, and Flint, Michigan, for example, residents can report information about vacant and abandoned properties using their mobile phones.

⁵ ibid

2

INCREASE ACCESS TO TECHNOLOGY

There are a number of creative ways for local government to increase access to technology.

In Wichita, Kansas, the city used an AARP Community Challenge grant to loan WiFi hotspots free of charge to residents without internet access. Other cities like Chattanooga, Tennessee, have recruited volunteers to train older adults how to use technology.

Other steps that cities can take to establish access for those aged 50+ include setting up kiosks at places like grocery stores and faith centers and establishing partnerships with companies or gathering places that have the necessary infrastructure to increase access.

3

ADDRESS BARRIERS RELATED TO INTERPRETATION AND DISABILITY

When planning any engagement, city officials should ensure that activities are accessible to people with disabilities.

This is particularly salient when organizing engagement over video conferencing. Several items to consider are:

- Usability: Is the video conferencing software easy to use?
- Screen Readers: Does the software work with both newer and older screen reading technology?
- Captions: What options does the software offer for captions?
- Sign Language Interpreters: Can users view or pin the speaker and sign language interpreter at the same time?
- Interpretation: Does the video conference offer real-time interpretation services?⁶

As you prepare for your engagement, create accessible materials and slides and communicate with participants ahead of time about what they can expect during the engagement activities. Be sure that materials are translated into any languages commonly used in the community.

Accessibility Resources

A number of organizations offer additional resources and guides to help you create more accessible virtual activities. These include the [New York City Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities](#), the [American Bar Association](#), and [National Endowment for the Arts](#).

⁶ Adapted from "Equitable and Inclusive Engagement: Creating an Accessible Virtual Meeting Space," Nicole Cabra and Paul Khouri, January 27, 2021. <https://www.publicagenda.org/newsroom/equitable-and-inclusive-engagement-creating-an-accessible-virtual-meeting-space/>.

4

INVEST IN OUTREACH

Before you engage virtually, take time to understand the community you wish to reach. City staff may wish to work with departments that are closely connected to local communities or partner with organizations with existing connections.

Regardless of your approach, keep in mind that effective engagement requires investment in advertising and getting the word out so that people know how, when, and where to connect with you. Reaching out will help you better understand the technology, internet access, and skills that are available within the community and decide what type of engagement will work best.

Unless you are proactive and find ways of meeting people where they're accustomed to being—in both offline and online spaces—very few residents will participate. The fanciest tools won't do you any good if people don't know they exist or find it difficult, overwhelming, or not worth the effort to engage.

Working with residents to instigate peer-to-peer outreach is an especially effective approach. Residents are more likely to attend something if they hear about it from a friend. That applies to older adults, though it may require adapting techniques, such as organizing volunteers to send handwritten invitations. In addition, provide trusted sources such as city commissions on aging or local AARP chapters with information so they can share it during their meetings and events.

Additionally, be sure to collect and share basic demographic data (age ranges, ethnicity, primary language, etc.) with those managing the engagement process. This can help you ensure all demographic groups are represented and design better programs.



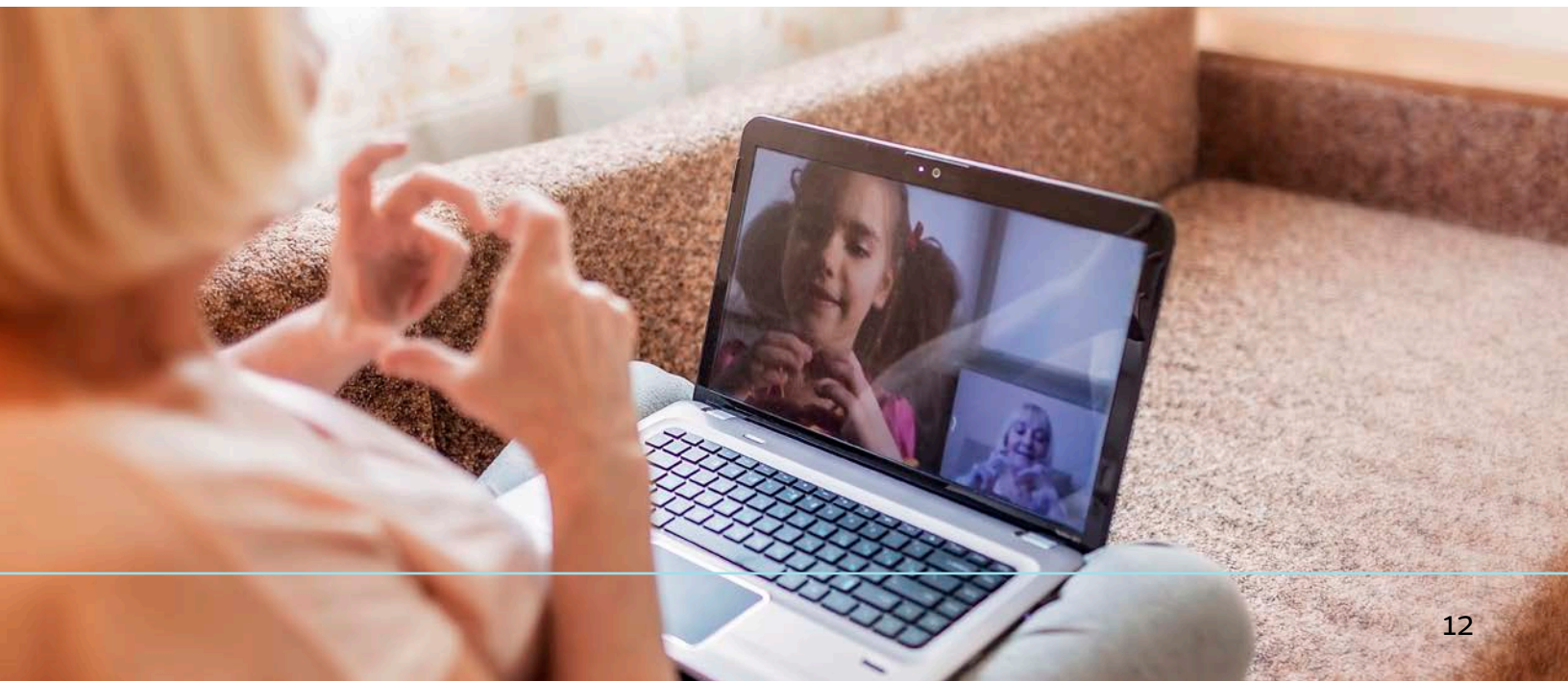
CASE STUDY: SENIOR TECHNOLOGY SUPPORT TEAM IN CHATTANOOGA

Until March of 2020, the Department of Youth and Family Development in Chattanooga, Tennessee, offered programs in education, arts, culture, wellness, and music in multiple safe and attractive facilities located throughout the city. Many of these programs were directed at older adults, but they came to a halt when the coronavirus required these facilities to close.

The Department of Youth and Family Development immediately developed new ways of delivering programs. They set up lines of communication using technology to create a “virtual senior center.” However, the need for a team

to help older adults use the technology quickly became apparent. The city applied for and received an AARP Community Challenge grant to develop a “Senior Technology Support Team.”

The team consists of a city staff member and a group of technologically savvy volunteers. The city trained and empowered the volunteers so they could work with older adults and extend the city’s reach. This team is now responsible for teaching and training seniors on the use of technology to help them connect, learn, and play online from the comfort and safety of their own homes.



BEST PRACTICES

5 Ways to Ensure Online Safety and Privacy

As cities adopt more online engagement tools, it is essential that those managing the systems and those interacting with such systems (the general public) have a good awareness of basic digital security best practices. Effective online safety requires a holistic approach, and we encourage you to share resources like the [Security Planner](#) with those inside and outside your organization.

A few basics that are essential for everyone to keep in mind include:

1

KEEP SYSTEMS UP-TO-DATE

Whether on a personal computer or a government website, keeping operating systems, servers, software, and applications up-to-date is critical to keeping systems running and secure. Turning on automatic updates for personal computers and smartphones is a simple and easy place to start.

2

CREATE A PLAN TO DETER AND RESPOND TO ONLINE HARASSMENT

No employees or members of the public should have to deal with online harassment, especially when engaging with a government entity or organization. Before launching a tool or initiative, be sure to consider ways in which abuse could occur and put a plan in place to mitigate it. A good place to start is by having moderators for online forums and setting clear and enforceable ground rules.

3

PRACTICE GOOD ACCOUNT SECURITY

For systems that require log-ins, like Facebook, the use of strong passwords and two-factor authentication is essential. Encourage their use by the public and require city employees to use them.

4

EDUCATE USERS ABOUT SCAMS AND PHISHING

Make sure that you're clear about which systems are set up and supported by your organization. Sometimes hackers or other bad actors will set up fake versions of government websites to steal data, cause confusion, or make a profit off of unsuspecting users. Clear public messaging and sharing resources, like this [simple phishing quiz](#), can help raise the level of awareness and make it harder for bad actors to disrupt your online engagement efforts.

5

BE CLEAR ABOUT DIGITAL PRIVACY

Take the privacy of any data that you collect during virtual engagement processes seriously. Here are some critical points to consider:

- Understand what data you are collecting, and ask yourself whether you really need to be collecting it. Does it actually serve a purpose? There may be very good reasons to avoid anonymity in some cases, but in others requiring people to provide their name or other personally identifying information could present an unnecessary barrier to use. Such requirements can also skew participation towards certain populations.
- Inform participants about what data you and the systems you're using are collecting, and give them an opportunity to opt-out of any data collection where feasible.
- Keep private communications private, and public communications public. Be very clear about what information you request or collect can be viewed by the public or other entities.
- Responsibly secure any personal data you collect. Ensure you have secured any computers, systems, or databases that might hold potentially sensitive or private information.



TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES

3 Tools to Assess Issues with Communities

Connecting with residents and tapping into their experience and expertise can help officials better assess the problems cities face and their effects on local communities. These techniques provide several avenues for residents to contribute their thoughts and ideas digitally. This kind of virtual engagement offers opportunities to reach more residents who may not otherwise attend meetings and to gain insights that better represent the lived experiences of communities across the city.

Key features to look for when considering a virtual engagement tool for assessing an issue with residents:

- Easily usable by phone and computer to increase accessibility
- No log-in required, which can increase participation rates
- Ability for residents to make anonymous contributions, which can help residents feel comfortable and open to contributing their opinions
- Allows residents to add information about their needs and ideas, as well prioritizing those needs and ideas
- Built in features to analyze information and help leaders understand input from large groups of people

The following virtual engagement tools can be used independently or paired together in order to meet specific goals and enable cities to hear more voices and turn input into action:

1 SMS CONVERSATIONS AND INTERACTIVE VOICE RESPONSE (IVR) SYSTEMS

Text messaging is one of the most accessible and user-friendly digital tools out there. As a result, texting can be an excellent on-ramp to digital engagement for those—including in the 50+ community—who might be less familiar with other tools and technologies. One option for connecting with the public via SMS is [Text, Talk, Engage \(TTE\)](#). TTE allows you to create specific scripts, including

polling questions, that the public can access and answer by texting a keyword to a given number. You can use these conversations to facilitate public discussion on important topics, provide information to the public about government processes, and even collect direct input to help make community-wide decisions.

IVR systems allow you to do the same thing via phone calls as opposed to text messaging. This can be another good on-ramp for those who might be less internet savvy. With IVR, users can dial into a number and use the touch-tone to answer questions and provide feedback on given ideas. One popular option for configuring IVR is [Twilio](#), which is commonly used by companies to configure their call centers.

2

LIVE POLLING

Live polling is an excellent way to deepen engagement during online town halls, community conversations, or other small- to medium-sized group sessions. Easily usable by phone or computer, [Mentimeter](#) is one option that allows participants to provide instant feedback on ideas, vote on concepts, and share their perspectives during a presentation or live discussion. Other popular options that provide similar functionality include [Poll Everywhere](#) and [Slido](#). These systems all allow for completely anonymous voting.

3

SURVEYS AND OTHER TOOLS

Surveys are a commonly-used way to gather input from residents. Three tools to conduct surveys include: [Google Forms](#), the simplest option; [Survey Monkey](#); and [Qualtrics](#), a more complicated but also more robust survey tool.

Another option is [Pol.is](#), a web-based application used for gathering, analyzing and understanding what large groups of people think in their own words, enabled by advanced statistics and machine learning. There are also tools specifically aimed at collecting feedback about budgets, such as [Open Budget](#).

Key Resources

The current landscape of civic technology and virtual engagement is vast and seemingly ever-expanding. [The Civic Tech Field Guide](#) is an excellent resource to get a sense of this landscape. It catalogues hundreds of tools and holds a wealth of information on various elements of civic technology. We also encourage you to review research from leading innovators in civic technology like [MySociety](#) and the [Guide to Remote Community Engagement](#).

CASE STUDY: TAIWANESE RESIDENTS ASSESS LEGISLATION

In 2015, the local government needed to address complex challenges created by the appearance of Uber on the Taiwan transportation scene.

Under the umbrella of an initiative known as vTaiwan, the government leveraged a carefully designed suite of tools to engage citizens, businesses, and other stakeholders and crowdsource ideas and assess community sentiment. Government and non-government organizations, including the civic tech community known as g0v, designed an innovative process supported at each turn by the use of open-data and technology.

In the first stage of the process, g0v and others supporting the initiative used advertisements on social media platforms to encourage people to join the conversation. In the next stage, the city focused on crowdsourcing ideas and gathering public opinion using online tools like Pol.is with great effect. Citizens were able to vote on

policy suggestions made by others or to contribute their own ideas.

In four weeks, 4,500 people contributed their thoughts or votes and g0v was able to draft six recommendations with which 80 percent of people agreed. After public conversations with experts, active online users, and government and business representatives alike, these recommendations and additional data collected from a survey were used to develop proposals for the Taiwanese Parliament.

These conversations and drafting sessions were live-streamed, and the public was asked to contribute through online chat rooms and digital whiteboards that were fed back into the meeting. At least 1,800 people watched the event or participated remotely. In the final stage, proposals were developed into a draft bill and sent to the Parliament, where all were ratified into new regulation.⁷

⁷ "Toward a More Democracy-Friendly Internet: AI on Social Media Is Part of the Problem. Can It Be Part of the Solution?" Quixada Moore-Vissing, Jim Euchner, and Will Friedman, March 2, 2020. https://www.publicagenda.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Toward-a-More-Democracy-Friendly-Internet_final-version.pdf.

TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES

4 Techniques for Deliberating with Residents

Effective deliberation involves several crucial elements: Working virtually or in-person with trained facilitators who utilize a variety of techniques, residents learn about the issue, discuss and consider various points of view, spark new ideas and solutions, and make decisions.

Effective virtual engagement has the potential to encourage deeper deliberation across differences and throughout diverse communities. Leaders can also collect some basic data while maintaining privacy and security, which will help them ensure that the entire community is accurately represented. Developing and maintaining a commitment to sharing data and leveraging allies inside and outside of city hall as well as engaging with a broader civic technology community can lead to more creative and effective solutions.

Key features to look for when considering a virtual engagement tool for deliberation:

- No login required, which can increase participation
- Ability to present critical background information about the topic being explored
- Allow leaders to present multiple ideas to participants at a time for exploration
- Sliding scale feature to indicate alignment/agreement
- Ability to recreate common focus group and community conversation tactics, such as using sticky notes to collect and organize participant ideas

There are a number of virtual engagement tools that can be used for deliberation. With the exception of Common Ground for Action, the tools below must be combined to create an effective deliberation process.

1

COMMON GROUND FOR ACTION

[Common Ground for Action](#) is built for deliberation and includes features and tools that help residents participate in each stage of deliberation, including exploring different ways of approaching issues, discussing the merits of solutions in small groups, and finding common ground.

2

LIVE STREAMING

While social media can be used for a [range of engagement purposes](#), [Facebook Live](#) is a feature very well suited for engaging the public and gathering input if combined with other tools. For example, you can use your city's Facebook page to host Facebook Live "town halls" and collect input via an active comment thread and Q&A session. Another option to consider is [YouTube Live](#), which allows for many of the same capabilities via YouTube instead of Facebook. Be sure to moderate any live comment threads during Facebook or YouTube Live sessions to ensure a safe and comfortable environment for engagement.

3

VIRTUAL WHITEBOARDS

Virtual Whiteboards, like the free [Jamboard](#) app by Google, can be great options to deepen virtual small group discussion in your city. Best paired with live video or conference calls, Jamboard and more sophisticated online whiteboard tools like [Miro](#) can help you virtually recreate common focus group and community conversation tactics, such as using sticky notes to collect and organize participant ideas.

These tools present a low barrier to entry because all residents have to do to participate is click a link on an internet-connected device. With that said, it's best to build-in time for familiarizing new audiences to a tool like this before use to ensure all audiences involved feel comfortable contributing. Also be sure to make clear to virtual whiteboard users what notes and comments might be made public or shared with a wider audience.

4

WEB APPLICATIONS THAT COLLECT FEEDBACK

One web-based application that allows for deliberation is [Consider.it](#), which helps to facilitate public input on specific policy ideas or budget priorities. Consider.it allows you to gauge the public's favorability of certain proposals on a sliding scale, as opposed to a simple yes/no vote, helping to bring nuance to the conversation. It does require a log-in to participate, however.

Another application is [All Our Ideas](#), an open source platform which presents users with two ideas and has users choose between them or submit a new idea. This is faster and easier than responding to a list of questions and results in a rank ordered list of the public's preferences. All Our Ideas doesn't require a login and has an intuitive interface. If your audience has basic internet savvy, All Our Ideas should be usable for them, but you'll likely want to invest some time in introducing the platform to less tech-savvy users.

CASE STUDY: TEXTING TO IMPROVE MENTAL HEALTH

In 2013, a coalition of nonprofit organizations and the federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) engaged over 50,000 people in text-enabled deliberation on mental health issues.

To start the engagement, the coalition developed a conversation script to guide discussion and prompt deliberation on a series of challenging topics. Once the script was designed and launched, participants were recruited, primarily through social media, and asked to form groups of 3-4 people. Groups then texted the word “start” to a pre-assigned number which prompted a series of text messages, including: discussion questions for the group; process suggestions; polling questions that could be answered from their phones; and requests to respond with action ideas and commitments they would make to strengthen mental health in their school or community. They also received links by text that conveyed further information on mental

health, including how relevant policy decisions are made and how mental health services are funded. The process also sent links that allowed participants to see how people in other parts of the country had responded to the polling and action questions.

Implemented as part of a program called “Text, Talk, Act,” powered by TTE SMS technology, evaluations of this engagement effort showed that participants learned about mental health, became more likely to reach out to others to seek help with mental health problems, and became better able to identify when friends or family members were experiencing mental health problems. The preferences recorded by the participants via SMS, along with those of the participants in accompanying large-scale face-to-face deliberations that took place as part of the National Dialogue on Mental Health, helped shape the next two years of funding decisions made by SAMHSA.

TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES

3 Tools for Virtual Volunteer Action and Communication

Activating residents so that they can solve problems in their community is an important part of creating sustainable engagement with communities. Virtual tools provide opportunities for improved communication and connection among staff and volunteers and within communities, ensuring that they are informed and remain engaged.

The techniques below include tools to recruit resident volunteers, improve ongoing communication, and create sustainable programs that involve residents. Most can support both in-person and virtual activities and projects.

Key features to look for when considering a virtual engagement tool for volunteer activation:

- Ability to present critical background information about volunteer opportunities and how-to-guides that support volunteer action
- Ability to track and showcase metrics related to the volunteer activities
- Ability to centralize available funds like grants from the city and community partners, or integrate crowdfunding platforms

There are a number of virtual engagement tools that can be used for volunteer activation. These can also be paired in order to meet your specific engagement goals.

1

TEXT BANKING

SMS is an excellent tool for first-time virtual engagement with less tech-savvy audiences. Tools like [Hustle](#) and [ThruText](#) allow you to leverage volunteers virtually to send out text messages and have engaged conversations with your list of contacts. These conversations can be aimed at informing the public, gathering further public input, or even recruiting more volunteers. Text Banking has been used extensively by political campaigns, and is an easy way to give people in the 50+ community an opportunity to volunteer from home.

2 VOLUNTEER PORTALS AND CROWDSOURCING

Using platforms like [ioby](#) or [Volunteermatch](#), you can post volunteer opportunities and recruit from a wide range of possible volunteers. ioby in particular is built around a crowdfunding platform, which gives opportunities to volunteers to donate monetarily if they're unable to donate time.

[Create the Good](#) is another site that connects residents with volunteer opportunities developed by AARP. Geared toward older adults, it allows them to share their life experiences, skills, and passions in their community. Residents can find and sign up for volunteer opportunities in their community, find project guides and ideas to help them develop their own projects, and post existing opportunities.

3 RELATIONAL ORGANIZING

Relational organizing apps like [Outreach Circle](#) and [Team](#) take the concept of text banking to the next level, providing a platform to manage and continually engage volunteers. These tools require volunteers to either download an app on a smartphone or log in through a browser, which requires more tech savvy than other options. But with a bit of investment in up-front training, relational organizing tools can be a powerful option to keep volunteers engaged, allowing you to send opportunities directly to them.

Cities of Service [Engagement Techniques](#) can support both in-person and virtual resident engagement, including:

Mini-grants: Small monetary awards provided by the city, along with technical assistance and other support, to citizen groups so they can take local action on a public problem. During COVID-19, a number of cities have used mini-grants to support the distribution of PPE, socially distanced outdoor activities, and the creation of resources like care packages that built community.

Impact Volunteering: A strategy that mobilizes resident volunteers in an ongoing effort to address a public problem. By focusing on a problem that is important to residents and to the city and monitoring progress, Impact Volunteering initiatives create a greater impact and are more sustainable.

CASE STUDY: RELATIONAL ORGANIZING TO ENGAGE LONG-TERM CARE VOLUNTEERS

The Service Employees International Union #2015 (SEIU 2015), which represents long-term care workers in California, was struggling to engage and retain volunteers, despite success with initial recruitment and training. The only method they had for keeping volunteers engaged after a training or event was to meet with them in person or via phone, which became difficult as the number of volunteers started to scale.

Turning to a relational organizing model allowed SEIU 2015 to leverage their existing relationships to maintain more consistent engagement and spread the burden of outreach across their entire network of volunteers, as opposed to keeping it centralized among a much smaller group of busy staff. For a technical platform to help implement this relational organizing model, SEIU 2015 turned to an application called OutreachCircle.

SEIU 2015 was able to configure and share (directly from the app which volunteers were instructed to download) small, micro-actions for volunteers to take about once or twice a week. These actions included simple tasks like watching videos, reading and sharing news articles, and sending out crafted text messages.

OutreachCircle's centralized volunteer management portal has also helped the organization recruit new volunteers and quickly get them involved. Once a volunteer signed up online or downloaded the app, they were able to immediately take action. This has lessened the administrative burden on SEIU 2015's staff and helped volunteers feel more value in signing-up right away. According to SEIU 2015, they recruited well over a thousand volunteers and had volunteers take hundreds of actions in the first year.⁸

⁸ "SEIU 2015 Spotlight: Recruiting, Managing and Reengaging Volunteers." Sangeeth Peruri, September 9, 2020. <https://blog.outreachcircle.com/2020/09/09/seiu-2015-spotlight-recruiting-managing-and-reengaging-volunteers/>.

About Cities of Service

Cities of Service helps mayors build stronger cities by changing the way local government and citizens work together. We help our coalition cities tap into citizen insights, skills, and service to identify and solve critical public problems. Founded in 2009 by New York City Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg, Cities of Service supports a coalition of 280 cities, representing more than 84 million people across the Americas and Europe. Now situated at Johns Hopkins University, you can learn more about Cities of Service at citiesofservice.jhu.edu and by following us on Twitter [@citiesofservice](https://twitter.com/citiesofservice).

About AARP

Approximately 45 million Americans are age 65 or older. By 2030, that number will reach 73 million Americans. At that point, fully one in five Americans will be older than 65. By 2035, the United States will—for the first time ever—be a country comprised of more older adults than of children. AARP Livable Communities supports the efforts of neighborhoods, towns, cities and rural areas to be great places for people of all ages. We believe that communities should provide safe, walkable streets; age-friendly housing and transportation options; access to needed services; and opportunities for residents of all ages to participate in community life.

Contact us at Livable@AARP.org and follow us on Twitter [@AARPLivable](https://twitter.com/AARPLivable) and Facebook [@AARPLivableCommunities](https://www.facebook.com/AARPLivableCommunities)

About Public Agenda

Public Agenda is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to creating a stronger, more inclusive, more participatory democracy for everyone. Through research and public engagement programs with local and national impact, we focus on raising up the voices of the public, bridging divides to facilitate progress, and strengthening relationships between institutions and the people they serve.

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