

ACLU of Wisconsin: Call on Joint Finance Committee to Hold Budget Hearings Virtually For Public Safety and Accessibility

Posted on Thursday, Feb 18, 2021

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MILWAUKEE – The ACLU of Wisconsin and 104 other organizations sent a letter today to the Joint Finance Committee urging them to allow people to participate in next month’s state budget hearings virtually, ensuring that everyone can safely join in the process.

The letter highlighted the importance of the Joint Finance Committee’s hearings in giving Wisconsinites a voice in the creation of the biennial budget, and asserted that the absence of virtual options would deter people from taking part in a process in which public engagement is vital.

“Because of the known risks with large public gatherings due to Covid-19 and the uncertainty about when it will be safe for all members of the public to attend, we as member-based organizations cannot in good conscience encourage our members to risk their health to attend large public hearings,” the letter stated.” While we represent far ranging and diverse populations, we are united in wanting to make sure that every person who wants to participate in the JFC hearings, and other legislative hearings this session, can do so safely.”

In addition to requesting that virtual attendance and engagement alternatives be made available, the advocacy groups also proposed a number of

recommendations:

- Establish an email address for the Joint Finance Committee expressly for collecting testimony for inclusion into the public record.
- Establish an online version of the hearing slip that can be used anywhere in the state by constituents to register their position on the budget similar to what they could fill out if they attended in person.
- Develop clear, consistent language and instructions for the public on how they may register and submit testimony remotely. We suggest these instructions are included as part of every public hearing notice.
- Allow use of virtual platforms for remote testimony. Many platforms allow registration in advance and uploading of files which may be useful features for legislative committees. State agencies have used these platforms for gathering public input and comment during the pandemic.
- Consider providing a limited (by registration) call-in option for individuals to provide remote testimony if they do not have access to the internet, do not have a computer or have poor broadband.
- Ensure there are clear guidelines and notices posted online and in other places to help people understand all testimony options.
- Coordinate with state expertise (such as the Department of Health Services media team) to maximize accessibility for constituents with sensory disabilities on virtual platforms.
- Partner with Wisconsin Eye to provide captioning and ASL interpreters for hearing impaired individuals for all public hearings using this service.

“The onset of the pandemic has forced people and organizations across the world to change how they operate in the service of protecting public health and combating infection, and there is simply no reason why the Joint Finance Committee can’t similarly work to adapt its public hearing process to accommodate the serious safety concerns posed by Covid-19. The people of Wisconsin should not have to risk their lives to exercise their right to weigh in on matters of great public concern, such as the writing of our state budget.”

The list of organizations is:

1000 Friends of Wisconsin

350 Madison

A Better Wisconsin Together

AARP Wisconsin

ACLU of Wisconsin

African American Roundtable, Inc

AFSCME Council 32

All Voting Is Local

Alliance for the Great Lakes

Autism Society of Greater Wisconsin

Autism Society of South Central Wisconsin

Autism Society Of Southeastern Wisconsin

Black Leaders Organizing for Communities (BLOC)

Black Lives Matter to Wisconsin Unitarian Universalists

Blue Sky Waukesha

Central Wisconsin ADAPT

Chippewa Valley Transit Alliance, Inc.

Citizen Action of Wisconsin

Citizen Advocates for Public Education

Clean Wisconsin

Coalition For Justice

Common Cause Wisconsin

Consumer Direct Care Network

Crawford Stewardship Project

Disability Rights Wisconsin

Dominican Sisters of Sinsinawa

End Domestic Abuse Wisconsin

Esther

Ex-Incarcerated People Organizing (EXPO)

Fair Wisconsin

First Baptist Church of Madison

For Our Future Wisconsin

Harambee Village Doulas

Interfaith Earth Network

Kids Forward

League of Women Voters of Wisconsin

LOV Inc, Living Our Visions Inclusively

Lutheran Office for Public Policy in Wisconsin

Madtown Mommas and Disability Advocates

Main Street Alliance

Metcalfe Park Community Bridges, Inc

Midwest Environmental Advocates

Milwaukee Branch NAACP

Milwaukee County Human Rights Commission

Milwaukee Inner-city Congregations Allied for Hope (MICAH)

Milwaukee Mental Health Task Force

Milwaukee Riverkeeper

Milwaukee Turners

Milwaukee Zen Center

Monona UMC

NAACP Milwaukee Branch

NASW WI

Northern Wisconsin NORML

People First Wisconsin

People of Progression

Planned Parenthood Advocates of Wisconsin

Progress North

Protect Our Care Wisconsin

RENEW Wisconsin

Rid Racism Milwaukee

River Alliance of Wisconsin

Schools and Communities United

Sierra Club Wisconsin

Souled Out Ministries INC

SOULS

Souls To The Polls

Southeastern Wisconsin ADAPT

Survival Survival Coalition of WI Disability Advocacy Organizations

The Arc Greater Columbia County

The Arc Wisconsin

The Arc-Dane County

UFCW Local 1473

Waupaca County ARC Inc.

WI Association of Family & Children's Agencies

WI Board for People with Developmental Disabilities

WI Conference NAACP

WI Early Childhood Association

Wisconsin Aging Advocacy Network

Wisconsin Alliance for Excellent Schools

Wisconsin Alliance for Women's Health

Wisconsin Coalition Against Sexual Assault

Wisconsin Coalition of Independent Living Centers, Inc.

Wisconsin Conservation Voters

Wisconsin Council of Churches

Wisconsin Democracy Campaign

Wisconsin Education Association Council

Wisconsin Environment

Wisconsin Environmental Health Network

Wisconsin Faith Voices for Justice

Wisconsin Family Assistance Center for Education, Training & Support (WI FACETS)

Wisconsin Farmers Union

Wisconsin Green Muslims

Wisconsin Health Professionals for Climate Action

Wisconsin Interfaith Power and Light

Wisconsin Justice Initiative

Wisconsin Lakes

Wisconsin Land and Water Conservation Association

Wisconsin Long Term Care Workforce Alliance

Wisconsin Muslim Civic Alliance

Wisconsin Primary Health Care Association

Wisconsin Public Education Network

Wisconsin Wildlife Federation

Wisconsin's Green Fire

WISPIRG

Youth Justice Milwaukee

This press release is available online: <https://www.aclu-wi.org/en/news/105-organizations-call-joint-finance-committee-hold-budget-hearings-virtually--public-safety-and>

This letter is available online: https://www.aclu-wi.org/sites/default/files/field_documents/2021_2_18_coalition_letter_for_virtual_testimony_at_hearings.pdf