

Opening the doors to Olympia with remote testimony

By Chris Cargill and Jason Mercier

By the end of the 2013 Legislative Session, Washington state lawmakers had introduced two 400-page budgets and held public hearings on them with just a few hours' notice. Unless you were the most accomplished speed reader in the world and were already sitting in Olympia, you had no chance to say anything meaningful at a public hearing before both budgets were voted on and passed in their respective houses.

For people who live outside of the Puget Sound area, the message from lawmakers appears to be: Your voice and opinions are not needed. It doesn't have to be this way.

On paper, the state of Washington has some of the best legislative transparency rules in the country — if lawmakers would only use them. Often, however, the rules are quietly set aside.

The disregard for public participation has led some legislators to cry foul. State Democratic Sen. Karen Fraser recently said she feels “sorry for people [in Eastern Washington]” who are given so little opportunity to participate.

There is an easy solution — technology. Since 2011, Washington Policy Center has held regular legislative Wake-Up Call forums throughout the state, connecting legislators via video conference to communities in Eastern Washington. Dozens of legislators and more than 1,000 citizens have participated, coming face to face — or screen to screen — with lawmakers.

The State Legislature should learn from these events and from other states and let citizens participate in the legislative process via remote connection.

Allowing the public to give lawmakers remote testimony at fixed locations around the state is not a partisan issue. It is a fairness issue. It would give citizens another opportunity to be part of the lawmaking process. And the idea has bipartisan support.

Allowing remote testimony would also help Washingtonians overcome anything Mother Nature may throw our way during the winter months that the legislature is in session, sometimes cutting off much of the state behind a wall of snow.

According to the National Conference of State Legislatures, several states already provide remote testimony options for citizens.

Nevada's capitol, Carson City, is hundreds of miles away from the state's main population center, Las Vegas. The Nevada Legislature therefore allows citizens in Las Vegas and across the state the chance to participate via teleconference.

Not only does this technology allow citizens from across Nevada to connect with their lawmakers, it also has the capability to bring in expert testimony from across the country and around the world to help inform the legislative debate. Washington Policy Center experts recently testified before the Nevada Legislature comfortably and economically from our office in Olympia via teleconference.

In Alaska, where the capitol is geographically set apart from much of the state's main population area, citizens almost always testify via remote location.

If the legislature truly wishes to hear from all of our state's citizens, it needs to give those citizens the opportunity to be a part of the process while enacting meaningful transparency reforms.

We stand ready to help lawmakers learn from our example with the legislative Wake-Up Call forums to help make remote testimony for citizens a reality in Washington. This would truly allow us to be one state when it comes to citizen participation in the lawmaking process. The good news is, several lawmakers have already expressed interest in moving this reform forward.