

February 1, 2021

The Honorable Wilton Simpson
President of the Senate
404 S. Monroe Street
Tallahassee, FL 32399-1100
simpson.wilton.web@flsenate.gov

The Honorable Chris Sprowls
Speaker of the House
420 South Monroe Street
Tallahassee, FL 32399-1300
Chris.Sprohls@myfloridahouse.gov

The Honorable Gary M. Farmer
Democratic Leader
404 S. Monroe Street
Tallahassee, FL 32399-1100
farmer.gary.web@flsenate.gov

The Honorable Bobby DuBose
Democratic Leader
420 South Monroe Street
Tallahassee, FL 32399-1300
Bobby.DuBose@myfloridahouse.gov

Dear Senate President Simpson, Speaker Sprowls, Senator Farmer and Representative DuBose,

Common Cause along with the undersigned organizations are dedicated to ensuring that Florida has a fully transparent and accountable legislative process so that Floridians may effectively advocate for or against policies that impact them and their communities. It is imperative that constituents are able to communicate with those who represent them, and that they have a voice in the process that impacts their day-to-day lives.

We understand the complex and changing landscape you as legislative leaders are faced with as you work through committee weeks and prepare for this year's legislative session during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. The safety of everyone involved is of paramount importance to us all.

After reviewing the public testimony protocols set forth by the Florida House and Senate, we are deeply concerned about government transparency and public oversight, particularly the lack of an option for the public to participate remotely and/or virtually. Recognizing that further adjustments to the plan may occur, we want to ensure advocates and the public have a vehicle for meaningful participation in the process moving forward. Transparency and accountability in the legislative process is critical to the public trust.

Florida must strike a balance between giving the Legislature the flexibility needed to execute its constitutional responsibilities during a crisis and the public's right to participate so the legislative process is fully transparent and accountable.

Because the pandemic exacerbated existing systemic inequities and health disparities, Black, Indigenous, and People of Color, low-income individuals, and people with disabilities have been hit especially hard. These communities also have historically struggled to be heard and have faced significant obstacles to participation in our legislative process. These struggles make the need for intentional and thoughtful consideration around public participation even more urgent and imperative.

Therefore, we are writing to ask that you ensure that the remaining committee weeks and 2021 legislative session have structures and systems in place to ensure accountability and an open, accessible, and transparent process that allows for meaningful input from the public. To protect democracy and encourage public participation in the legislative process, both during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, we call on you to develop, share publicly, and implement a plan that addresses and includes the following elements:

Ensuring Transparency and Public Engagement

- **Accessible technology:** Accessible opportunities for engagement during public hearings and informational forums that adhere to public health guidelines. The Legislature should: ensure remote public access to meetings, hearings and forums; eliminate technological barriers that limit accessibility for some, including (but not limited to) providing closed captioning services, simultaneous language translation, and/or ASL interpreters; and provide an option to participate in the hearing via teleconference.
- **Online registration to testify:** Public testimony should be allowed at least to the same extent it would have been prior to COVID-19. People should have the ability to sign up to testify online. Those individuals then should receive a window of time in which they can expect to testify.
- **Testimony:** Video or teleconference testimony: People wishing to testify at public hearings should have the ability to testify via teleconference or videoconference and respond to questions in real time.
 - Pre-recorded testimony: People should also be afforded the opportunity to submit recorded video or audio testimony for viewing or listening during the public hearing.
 - Written testimony: All written testimony should be available for public inspection online in real-time.
 - In person testimony: To avoid any appearance of impropriety in the slot allocation process, the selection process must be transparent. The criteria for selection, number of slots available, and list of chosen speakers should be made available in a timely fashion. If public health guidelines limit the number of people able to be present at an in-person public hearing or forum, the Legislature or committee should move the public hearing or forum to a larger venue to allow for full public participation.

We thank you for all you are doing to protect the health and safety of Floridians and for all the work the legislature will be devoting to balancing our budget and considering hundreds of bills this upcoming session. We hope that you will take our recommendations and request into consideration and we look forward to your response. Contact information can be provided for any of the specific organizations below. Please, feel free to send us your written response at ageilert@commoncause.org and I will distribute that to all of the undersigned organizations.

Sincerely,

Common Cause Florida
Florida Rising
Florida Building and Construction Trades Council
SPLC Action Fund
Progress Florida
Florida Alliance of Planned Parenthood Affiliates
Florida Policy Institute
The Common Ground Project
ACLU Florida
All Voting Is Local
All On The Line Florida
League of Women Voters of Florida
FairDistricts NOW
State Voices Florida
Disability Rights Florida
ReThink Energy Florida
Florida Asian Services
OCA South Florida Chapter
Florida Asian Women Alliance
A AFF South Region
Asian American Federation of Florida
The First Coast Leadership Foundation
CAIR-Florida
Broward for Progress
Broward Young Democrats
National Council of Jewish Women, State of Florida
Center for Biological Diversity
NAACP Legal Defense Fund
Women's March Florida
Indivisible FL13
Sierra Club FL
Ntl Council of Jewish Wmn Gtr Miami Section
Mi Familia Vota
Democratic Disability Caucus of Florida
Miami DSA
Miami Workers Center