



# **Report to the Louisiana Development Disabilities Council**

Observations and Recommendations for Improving Council  
Meetings and Increasing Member Engagement

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## **Project Background and Purpose**

In December 2011, the Council Structure Ad Hoc Committee recommended securing a governance specialist to provide the Council with advice on improving meetings and increasing member participation. In January the Council voted to move forward with the engagement of a consultant.

The Louisiana Development Disabilities Council (LDDC) contracted with the Louisiana Association of Nonprofit Organizations (LANO) to observe and assess the April 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Council meetings and to provide recommendations for improving Council member engagement and increasing planning and meeting effectiveness and efficiency.

## **Assessment Process**

Prior to the April meetings, LANO VP of Programs, Kellie Chavez Greene, met via conference call with Executive Director, Sandee Winchell, and Council President, Sam Beech to orient LANO to the work leading to assessment and to establish the desired outcomes from the observation. It was reiterated on the call that the desired results from the consultation are feedback and recommendations on improving Council meetings and increasing Council member participation. In addition, LDDC's leadership expressed a commitment to ensuring that all of the members receive the information that they need to be active contributors and feel that their service is worth their investment of time.

In addition to observing the April 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> meetings, LANO:

- Reviewed key organizational documents including the meeting packet; meeting minutes from January committee and business meetings; April meeting evaluation responses; and Council orientation materials.
- Ate lunch with Council members and staff. Informal conversation during meals and breaks helped to add context to observations.
- Issued a survey at the conclusion of the meeting to capture feedback directly from the members.
- Interviewed four members of the Council.

- Met with Sandee Winchell via conference call post meetings to clarify questions on initial observations and request additional materials for review.

## **Observations and Recommendations**

- **Meeting Setting**

The setting of a meeting is critical in fostering a participatory environment that encourages and facilitates engagement from everyone. LDDC modeled several best practices in the setting for the April meeting. The u-shaped table is an effective way of creating equity among participants and ensuring that everyone can see each other. The posters with the Ground Rules and Mandate displayed during the meeting helped to set the tone and remind members of their purpose. Meals, refreshments, and breaks provided members with what they needed to stay charged during the two days of meetings.

Recommendations: Display a mission poster in addition to the ground rules and mandate signage. Assign members to read the ground rules, mandate, and mission at the beginning of the business meeting. This reminds members of their practices and principles and rotating assignments is a way to engage members that tend to be less vocal in meetings. Incorporate 5 minute stretch breaks and/or an activity to break up the meeting. For example, show one of the PSAs that were highlighted during the planning session. One verbal report after the other can be taxing on some members attention spans. A quick pause between reports with a stretch or visual will help members refocus.

- **Meeting Technology: Microphones**

It is obvious that the Council works hard to provide a setting that is conducive to the needs of its members. In order to achieve this goal, the Council requires that comments are made in a microphone. Staff is responsible for getting the microphone to the member wishing to speak. The policing of this practice became a distraction and appeared to dissuade some members from commenting. Staff with the microphones were unable to fully concentrate on the meeting and feedback and static by their movement added to the distraction. Members in the survey and interviews noted that the microphone policy is a challenge.

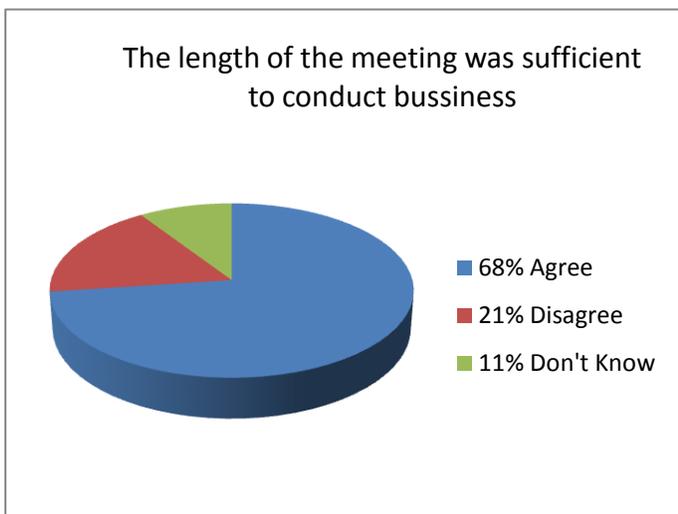
There is no easy solution to address the need to amplify member comments and the challenges associated with using microphones. The Council has made a significant investment in the microphone technology and any upgrade would be costly.

Recommendation: Invest in additional microphones and place them at the table on stands so that members can easily pass them to each other. More microphones available at the table would reduce the amount of passing needed and remove the staff from having to manage the microphones.

- **Meeting Structure**

The April meeting was a planning meeting and not structured like a typical Council meeting. Regular meetings start with committee meetings on Wednesday afternoon and include dinner and a speaker. The following Thursday is the business meeting.

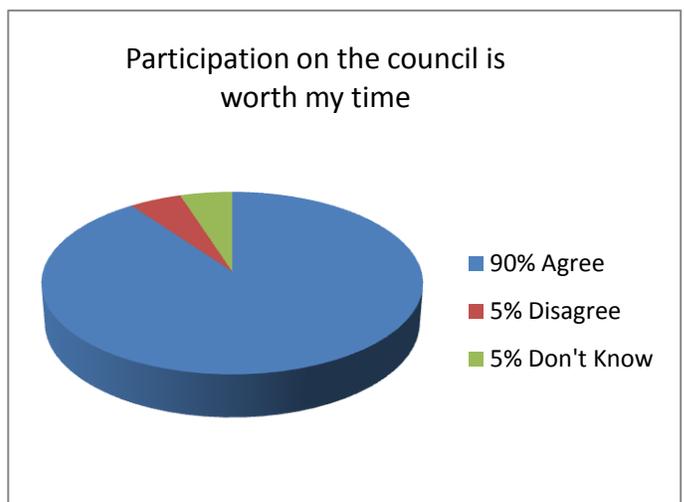
Almost a quarter of the Council reported that the April meeting was too long. Comments on the survey and in interviews included recommendations for shorter meetings in general with an emphasis on priorities.



It is a challenge to convene a statewide board. Travel is costly in both time and expenses. To leverage the Council's time and travel, committee meetings are held the day before the business meeting.

Some members reported that by the time of the business meeting they are tired and overwhelmed with information. In addition, they suggested that the 2-day meeting seemed to prevent agency representatives from participating in committee meetings.

It is unrealistic to suggest that the Council separate committee meetings from the business meeting. It would be an added burden on members to travel for additional meetings and the expenses associated with travel would increase.



- **Meeting Agenda**

**90%** reported that agendas are well planned and **90%** reported committee and agency reports are relevant and informative. The agendas for the business meeting model best practices and include the necessary reports and action required by the Council. The executive committee should continue the good work started on refining the agenda based on feedback from the Council. To ensure that meetings follow the agenda, the recent guidelines developed for verbal reports should be reinforced. Recommendations for improving agency reports are on pages 6-7.

The following recommendations will increase efficiency in the agenda and make room for more Council discussion and problem-solving on priority issues.

Recommendations: Consider if it is necessary for all of the agencies to report at every meeting. Agencies would still continue to submit written reports quarterly, but verbal reports at meetings could be limited to those impacting the current work of the Council. This would make time in the agenda for members to respond and react to the reports; ask questions; and develop action plans and solutions if needed. Specific questions regarding the reports could be posed in advance for members to consider prior to the meeting. The current structure of every agency reporting doesn't allow time for dialogue and engagement with the speaker. This limits Council member participation and learning about an issue.

Another consideration is inviting state agencies to serve as the guest speaker the night before the business meeting in lieu of providing a verbal report at the meeting. For example, the information presented at the April meeting on the impact of healthcare reform on Medicaid was informative and several members expressed appreciation for the information provided. However, this presentation could have been scheduled after a Wednesday dinner with engagement from the Council on how the information presented might impact its constituents and goals. The presentation on transportation is another example of a report that could have been moved out of the business meeting.

Reducing the number of verbal reports will create space in the agenda for proactive discussion on current issues and priorities.

- **Meetings Minutes and Materials**

The meeting materials prepared by staff are in-line with best practices and greatly appreciated by the Council. **100%** of members reported in the survey that the meeting

materials provided in advance of the meeting were helpful and that they reviewed the materials prior to the meeting. The minutes and notes reviewed from both the January and April meetings are detailed and capture the major action items and discussions. The Executive Director report is comprehensive and includes the updates and data important to the Council.

Although the materials are valued and help to track verbal reports and discussion, some members appeared to have difficulty managing their paperwork during the meeting. This became a distraction for them, taking their attention away from the meeting. Comments during interviews regarding the amount of materials being provided as overwhelming validated this observation.

Recommendations: Reduce the amount of paper provided during the meeting. Projecting information on the screen in place of paper when possible and limiting written reports to 2-3 pages are options for consideration. The use of color paper to differentiate the reports seemed to help members locate the report needed. It would be helpful if the speaker would start off the verbal report stating the color of their report. Having 2-3 PowerPoint slides with the output data and highlights from the agency written report would help to keep the attention of the Council members and ensure that the verbal report was focused on the points identified in advance as the most critical information to be shared with the Council.

Providing members with binders with tabs for minutes, reports, and financial would help members organize their materials during the meeting and over time. Materials sent in advance could be 3-hole punched to facilitate easy placement in the binders. Members would be responsible for bringing their binders to the meeting reducing the need to duplicate materials that were sent in advance.

- **Agency Reports**

In both the survey results and interviews the members reported that the reports from members, particularly the state agencies, are critical to the work of the Council and a highlight of the meeting. There were some questions regarding the relevancy of some of the information being reported by the agencies. In addition, some of the information reported during the business meeting would have been beneficial to the committees the night before. Recommendations for increasing state agency participation in committee meetings are on page 8. The following recommendations are intended to build on the improvements underway for agency reports and increase engagement between advocate members and their state agency colleagues.

Recommendations: Work with state agencies and other members charged with reporting to focus the information presented in both the written and verbal reports on activities and actions needed to advance the current work of the Council and the strategic plan. Reports that focus on the future and prepare and engage members to address challenges and opportunities in meeting their objectives will foster action-oriented discussions.

Written reports from the Department of Education, Department of Health and Hospitals, and Advocacy Center list the objectives and activities directly from the strategic plan that align with their agency’s mission and work. Following the list is an update on progress made. It is recommended that all written reports follow this model.

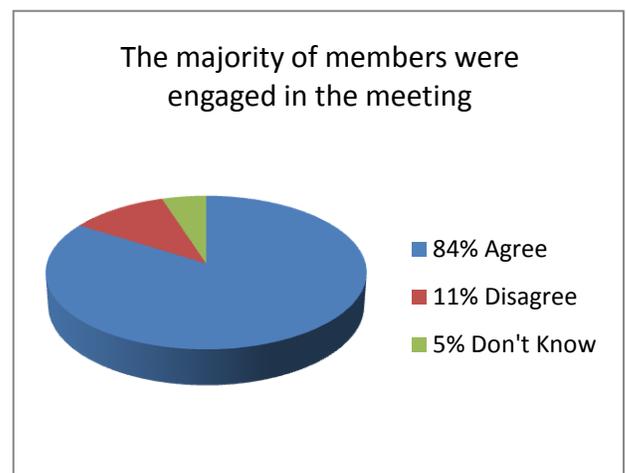
Recommendations: Members that don’t meet their deadline for written reports to be included in the meeting packet should follow-through and submit a written report as part of the record. This policy reinforces the value of the written reports and hold members accountable for fulfilling this obligation. Setting outlook appointments reminding members of deadlines for submission of reports could help to remind them of this commitment.

- **Member Engagement**

The Council is charged with advancing its mission to advocate for and support people with developmental disabilities to exercise control over their lives and participate fully in the community. This is a significant responsibility for which Louisiana’s citizenry and developmental disability community depend on the Council.

The composition of the Council is dictated by law and includes a mix of advocates and private and public agency representatives from across the state. Each member brings a unique perspective to the table that collectively represents Louisiana’s developmental disability community. Council meetings are the primary vehicle for which the Council receives information and makes strategic decisions. It is critical to the success of the Council that each member is empowered with the information and tools needed to be active contributors during.

Council members reported in the survey and interviews high levels of satisfaction with member engagement in the business meetings. There were some concerns expressed with the lack of participation from agency



representatives in committee meetings which is addressed later in the report.

The advocate members of the Council bring incredible value and a distinct point of view to the Council's work. It appeared that participation in the April meetings from some of the self-advocate members of the Council was limited by the microphone technology and the format of the meeting being heavy on reports from staff and agencies. In the April meeting, it appeared that some self-advocates would have benefited from guidance from their peers on when and how to make a comment in a meeting. Special attention needs to be paid to ensure that all of the self-advocate members have an opportunity to participate in the meeting in a meaningful way.

Recommendations: Formalize the mentoring program for advocate Council members. Agency Council members are serving as part of their paid job and will most likely have experience participating on commissions and boards. Some advocate Council members may need more orientation and guidance on how to participate in a business meeting and interpret the information being provided. Some advocate members might also benefit from having a peer to pose questions to and process their ideas outside of the business meeting.

Formalizing the mentoring program would include the development of a job description for mentors and expectations for both the mentors and mentees. Not all Council members need a mentor and the opportunity should be available as an added resource for those that would benefit from it.

Part of the expectations should include tangible activities that help to ensure that the program is meeting its intended objectives and regular evaluation of the program's effectiveness. Activities could include a phone call before the meeting to review the packet and identify times in the agenda where the mentee has a point to contribute; sitting next to the mentee at the business meeting and encouraging them to participate; and a phone call after the meeting to check-in and get their feedback on the meeting. It is recommended that mentors also be advocate members of the Council. Advocate mentors will be able to relate directly to the mentees needs. Agency representatives are likely too busy to add another volunteer role to their service on the Council.

An intentional mentoring program would not only increase participation among advocate Council members, it will also build the capacity of the mentees. The skills and experience gained from the mentor relationship will be carried on to other service opportunities embarked on by the mentees.

- **State Agency Engagement on Committees**

Survey data and comments made during the meeting and interviews stressed the value-added and importance of the state agency representatives on the Council. Advocate members noted that it is a privilege and rare opportunity for them to be able to interact with state agencies that have a direct role and impact on the resources and policies that impact their lives.

In the April meeting it was observed that information provided by the agencies during the business meeting was relevant and important to the committee work the night before. Members voiced concern regarding the lack of agency participation on committees during the meeting and in the interviews.

Review of the attendance roster validated that the majority of state agency representatives don't attend committee meetings. It is important to recognize that there are two state agency representatives consistently attend committee meetings. It was reported that occasionally state agencies send a representative to the committee meetings. This practice was noted as appreciated, but not as impactful as if the Council member would have attended.

The Council is fortunate to have high ranking state agency representatives on the Council. These leaders are managing busy calendars and multiple priorities. It is likely that these leaders aren't attending committee meetings due to their schedules. To address this challenge, state agencies could assign a single representative to attend committee meetings on their behalf. This representative would be responsible for attending all committee meetings and serving as the liaison to the agency representative on the Council.

Recommendations: The Council should work with state agencies to determine the barriers to their engagement at the committee level. Most of the decision-making and action-oriented work of the Council is at the committee level. It is critical that information provided by state agencies is available to inform the committee's work and recommendations to the full Council. Planning committee meeting agendas in advance with key topics for discussion identified could help state agency members to prioritize the committee meetings that they will attend.

- **General Observations and Recommendations**

### **Action Items**

In a 2-day meeting it can be a challenge to capture all the action items and request for follow-up. These items can get lost in minutes and notes which diminishes member engagement. Noting action items on flip chart paper as they surface that includes a timeline and lead responsible for implementation would help to foster member participation and hold the Council and staff accountable for follow-through. The use of flip chart paper is a way to validate Council member feedback by recognizing it real-time and also creates another visual for the meeting. This practice also encourages members to be vocal and participate in action-oriented discussions.

### **Planning Process**

The planning discussion could have benefited from a facilitator and participatory process that used small groups and guided questions to facilitate the revising of the strategic plan. Taking the staff out of the facilitator role would allow them to participate in the planning without appearing to be influencing the council or leading the discussion.

Adding a purpose statement to each of the planning areas would help to clarify the intent of the work in that specific area and the desired outcomes. This shared understanding of the purpose and desired results would have set context for the goals and objectives. Including the objectives and activities in the written reports with updates as recommended earlier in the report will help the Council monitor the plan and make adjustments real-time. This practice should free up time in future planning retreats to focus on assessing the current situation (SWOT Analysis) and long-range visioning.

During the planning discussion there were questions from the Council regarding existing and proposed programs. For example, there was rich discussion on Early Steps and the proposed training of medical professionals. In the case of Early Steps, the state agency representative was able to provide critical information on reductions in funding. These are the types of updates that the Council needs on a timely basis so that they can problem solve and make adjustments to the plan if needed. Council members also had questions regarding the People First program and Families Helping Families. Time to go deep into discussion on these programs during the planning process would have better positioned the committees for their planning.

### **Orientation**

The orientation agenda and process is impressive. Continue to require that all members participate in the orientation. Engage agency Council members in the orientation as much

as possible. For example, invite them to join the agenda at a specific time to introduce themselves and their agencies to the new Council members.

### **Committee Structure**

The committee structure itself could be a barrier to state agency participation. It is recommended that the committee structure be evaluated for relevancy, effectiveness, and efficiency. The two primary programmatic committees cover multiple topics which could be split into separate committees. More committees would allow for more focused engagement by members on specific topic. Smaller committees would also be able to operate more efficiently with less time for meetings and possible meetings via conference call. State agency representatives could be assigned to committees that have a direct link to their agencies mission and their jobs. This would be an incentive for them to participate in meetings.

Establishing ad-hoc committees such as the committee established at the April meeting on the training of medical professionals is a best practice that should be continued when appropriate.

### **Conflict of Interest**

It is a conflict of interest for Council members benefiting from funding from the LDDC to their agencies to participate in discussions and decisions regarding funding decisions. This practice is counter to best practices in governance.

Members with a conflict should disclose the conflict and remove themselves from the discussion and vote. These members should follow the same process as described to other grantees and contractors for submitting information needed for funding decisions. The current practice could lead to a perception of persuasion and favoritism among the Council for funding decisions. The orientation materials contain language on Council practices and policies for disclosure and conflict of interest. It is recommended that the Council enforce compliance with these policies and reorient members annually during the signing of their agreements.

### **Conclusion**

The observations and recommendations in this report are intended to help the Council improve their meetings and foster greater participation among the membership. Observations are based on the April meetings, materials reviewed, survey data, and interviews with four members. The Council should reflect on the recommendations with consideration for the limits of the observer and information provided.