

The Advisory Committee Member's Bill of Rights

Preamble

Government advisory committee members provide the gift of their time and perspectives to a wide variety of programs and initiatives. They help governments avoid costly mistakes. They are essential for the government to overcome centuries of inequitable (or just plain bad) policies. If the time, energy, talents and skills of advisory committee members are not well used, that dynamic will discourage future participants, exhaust current ones, and leave advisory committees worse than useless. These rights seek to preserve the viability and vitality of advisory committee members.

The right for your valuable time and input to make a difference.

- The preponderance of your time should be spent advising, not in trainings, process, discussions, or ‘bonding’ with other committee members. Those activities all have their place, but if the balance of time is not spent on making substantive recommendations on substantive policies, you might as well join a service club.

The right to expect follow-up and accountability to your recommendations.

- As an advisory committee member, you will be giving advice. Not every recommendation will be adopted, but you have the right to know your advice was considered by people with the power to implement it. If they choose not to do so, you have the right to know why not.

The right to adequate, appropriate staffing.

- Advisory members should not be doing administrative tasks like taking minutes, scheduling meetings or even drafting documents if they don't want to. They should be staffed like executives.
- You should also not be subject to overbearing or leading staff. Staff may or may not have subject knowledge and expertise, but their opinions on matters of policy or direction should inform, not direct or overshadow those of advisory committee members.

The right to not be tokenized.

- As an advisor you may bring expertise based on your lived experience. That experience, and its relevance to the topic at hand should be weighed, considered, and valued. However, you should not be made to represent or speak for an entire group's experience.
- Your voice should also not constitute the entirety of other committee members' education on your experience.

The right not to be the only one 'of your kind.'

- Advisory committees generally seek diverse input. This is good. But if you are the only one 'of your kind' on a committee, you may find yourself isolated, demoralized, and regularly misunderstood.
- You have the right to have supportive allies in the room with you (although not the right that they agree with you on everything). This may mean more than one person in your 'category' on the committee, which may mean committees larger than government agencies originally intend. They should adapt as needed.

The right not to be re-traumatized by reliving the lived experience you bring to bear.

- You may be at the table because you had a painful or negative experience the government is seeking to avoid. But you should not be re-traumatized by serving on the committee.
- Avoiding this may take different forms for different people. Maybe you can share what you learned in different ways. Maybe facilitators are trained to help avoid trauma. You will probably know best. But sharing traumatizing experiences shouldn't be traumatizing.

The right not to be harassed or abused by other committee members.

- Diverse advisory committee members may not agree. But conflict should not come with abuse. The government agency is responsible for protecting you from this.

The right to training when needed.

- You bring perspective and lived experience. You may not bring all the specific skills needed to participate on a committee. You have the right to request specific training and mentoring you need to be effective. This could range from parliamentary procedure to culture competency.

The right to be treated as a friend to government, not an enemy (no matter how critical you are)

- Criticizing government policies does not make you an enemy of government. By engaging, you are demonstrating your friendship.

The right to serve your time, learn from those before you, and teach those who follow you.

- Service terms should not be endless and should be clearly stated. The ideal term will vary from committee to committee, but agencies should not avoid the labor of recruiting good members by relying on the same people.
- Exit interviews and other tools should be used to support continuity.
- There may be overlap between outgoing and incoming members, active mentoring.

The right to privacy within your role as a public leader

- If you are advising from community, you should speak with community. You may help provide transparency at times when government is unwilling or unable to do so. You may be a liaison.

- If you are advising on the basis of lived experience, that lived experience may well be part of the conversation (without traumatizing - see above).
- But this doesn't mean sacrificing personal privacy. Government should protect, to the extent that it can, things like your home address, place of employment, or family relationships that are irrelevant to your service and connection to community.
- [I'm having a hard time working through this one and feel like it's very complicated with ethics rules and public records and such.]
- [intent: Government should try to protect you from doxxing.
- [intent: Community has a right to expect you to communicate if you're speaking on behalf of community - e.g., you shouldn't arguing for closed door meetings to protect your personal privacy because you're talking about your lived experience - or at least, it should be the exceptional meeting - but maybe that belongs among the rights of the community, not the committee member.]

You do NOT have:

The right to absolute privacy.

- If you are advising from community, you have an obligation to speak with community. There may be rare exceptions, but the default assumption is that you are in some ways a public figure.

The Advisory Committee Member's Bill of Rights is created and distributed by the Mental Health Association of Portland. You can learn more about the organization at its website - www.mentalhealthportland.



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