NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF
Community Health Centers ®

COVID-19 and Health Center Boards

FOCUS AREA: STRENGTHENING HEALTH CENTER GOVERNANCE INFRASTRUCTURE AND PROCESSES

Virtual Board Retreats

BACKGROUND

It is common practice for boards to hold an annual retreat. Retreats allow a board time to focus on specific issues or challenges, as well offer time for board members to build relationships. Pre-pandemic, boards often dedicated several hours or a full day for an in-person gathering. As the pandemic continues, boards are considering holding these important annual gatherings virtually. This short resource outlines how health center boards can plan a virtual retreat during the pandemic, and offers some tools and templates that can be customized by boards.

Items to Consider

Governance is unique because authority is placed in the board of directors as a collective and this authority is exercised when the board formally convenes at its board meetings. Research demonstrates that boards are more effective when members know one another, and board retreats provide one way to deepen relationships between board members and build trust among members. Additionally, retreats allow time for boards to consider complicated or future-focused issues that are difficult to handle in a routine board meeting. Virtual retreats offer boards a meaningful way to realize the benefits of a retreat during the pandemic (and even potentially post-pandemic). Below are some items boards may wish to consider regarding virtual board retreats:

- **Adopt the perspective that meaningful personal connections and discussions *can* happen virtually—**One of the most common things we hear from board members these days is a desire for return to "normal" and a time when members can be together in-person. While we all look forward to a time when we can routinely meet safely in-person after the pandemic, it is important to understand that meaningful retreats can happen virtually.

- **Use a platform where board members can both hear and see one another to provide the ability for interaction and personal connection during the retreat—**The best virtual retreats ensure that board members can both see and hear one another. If your board is already using an online platform for board meetings, use the same one for the virtual retreat. If your board is still meeting by teleconference, use this as an opportunity to try an online tool such as:[1]

  - Go To Meeting https://www.gotomeeting.com/
  - WebEx https://www.webex.com/
  - Zoom https://zoom.us/

While many board members may already be familiar with such tools, it is important to not assume knowledge and ensure members are comfortable with how to log-in and use components such as the mute button, video, chat, etc. It is also important to ensure each member has a device (e.g., tablet, computer, internet) that will allow them to participate. Many boards provide tablets for board business.

- **Determine whether the board will lead the retreat itself or whether to engage an external consultant—**Some boards opt to manage the retreat on their own in partnership with the CEO;

[1]   Inclusion on the list should not, and is not intended to, imply an endorsement or recommendation of a particular vendor/consultant.

a committee (e.g., Executive, Governance/Board Development) may be tasked with setting the agenda. In this case, it is helpful to ensure a board or staff member is involved that has experience using the capabilities of the virtual platform selected for the retreat (e.g., breakout rooms, chat, polling, virtual sticky notes/board, etc.) in order to make the retreat interactive and engaging. Some boards may opt to hire an external consultant to transform the objectives for the retreat into an agenda, and to manage facilitation and logistics during the retreat. If your board opts to engage a consultant, be sure to look for experience leading sessions in a virtual environment.

- **Establish clear and manageable objectives for the retreat—**Be sure to keep the focus manageable. Select two or three objectives for the retreat. For some boards, having social time to build on relationships between board members may be the primary objective. Other boards may wish to balance social time with discussion about the ongoing impacts of COVID-19, post-pandemic strategy, or other focus areas. Setting clear objectives will make setting the agenda an easier task.

- **Design the agenda based on the objectives—**A virtual retreat is likely to be shorter than an in-person retreat. Be sure to dedicate the appropriate amount of time for each stated objective. It is important to also build in several breaks. In a virtual setting, break times generally need to be longer. Breaks can also provide additional time for optional informal conversations that may

take place as other board members take a break as signaled by turning off their camera and muting their microphone. The appendix contains a sample retreat agenda.

- **Consider practices for virtual meetings that may enhance the retreat—**The retreat may include:

  - **Group agreements—**Establish group agreements for the retreat that indicate expectations such as mute yourself when not talking, take breaks if needed, listen, and participate actively. See the appendix for a sample list.

  - **Consider icebreakers and informal questions to deepen relationships—**Consider a few places to integrate informal questions to deepen relationships. For example, have a question on screen as members join the retreat to open conversation, consider building in "coffee break" time for informal discussion, or even consider small group breakout rooms where board members can be grouped and provided with various questions for discussion. Seasonal questions can make helpful icebreakers (e.g., What is your favorite Thanksgiving dish? What is your favorite pie?).

  - **Consider a mix of large group and small group discussions—**Consider what exercises or discussions may be best handled with the full board, and whether there is opportunity to break the board into small groups using "breakout" rooms which could be followed by report outs and additional discussion or prioritization.

- **Plan facilitation that allows for every voice to be heard—**Structure discussions so that every board member has an opportunity to be heard. This might include:

  - Going "round robin" by posing a question and going board member by board member to hear answers (note: providing time for reflection before asking board members to share may be helpful)

  - Asking everyone to add responses to a shared document or virtual "dry erase" board

  - Using small groups

  - Intentionally asking participants to speak up if they normally don't and to listen up if they normally are eager to share comments. This role reversal invites new perspectives and can allow for diverse ideas in a limited amount of time.

- **Seek feedback after the retreat—**Solicit input from members about what worked well and what they might like to do differently at future retreats.
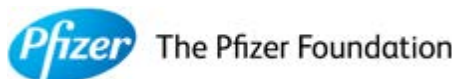
Discussion Questions

Below are questions that board members may want to ask when planning a virtual board retreat:

- What online platform will we use? Do board members need training on how to use the platform?

- Do all members have a device (tablet, computer) to participate in a virtual board retreat?

- Who will design the retreat? Do we have the resources to work with an external consultant to design and conduct the retreat? Will the board lead the retreat?
- What are the objectives for the virtual board retreat?
- Do we want to use both large group and small group (e.g., via breakout rooms) discussion?
- How much time do we want to allocate for relationship building and informal time?
- How will we know if the retreat has been successful?

Acknowledgements and Additional Information

APPENDIX 1: SAMPLE VIRTUAL RETREAT AGENDA

The following is a sample agenda for a half-day virtual board retreat.

Objectives
I. Provide an opportunity for board members to connect
II. Celebrate successes over the last year
III. Discuss key opportunities and challenges—current and post-pandemic

Agenda
9:00 **Welcome and Setting the Scene**
- Welcome from Board Chair
- What to Expect during the Virtual Retreat
- Group Agreements

9:15 **Catching Up**
- Discussion time intended for board members to "catch up"

9:45 Break

10:00 **Celebrating Successes**
- Reflect on the board's successes since the start of the pandemic

10:30 Break

10:45 **Looking Forward: Key Opportunities and Challenges—Current and Post-Pandemic**
- Small group: Considering Current and Post-Pandemic Strategic Opportunities and Challenges

11:15 Break

11:45 **Looking Forward (continued)**
- Small groups report to the full board
- Large group: Prioritize focus areas

12:30 Wrap Up

APPENDIX 2: SAMPLE GROUP AGREEMENTS FOR VIRTUAL RETREATS

The following are sample group agreements for a virtual board retreat.
- Keep your camera on unless on break
- Mute your device when you are not speaking
- Listen actively
- Share your views
- Be present
- Take care of your needs at home

CASE STUDY: "HYBRID" BOARD RETREAT IN ACTION

A health center in northeastern North Carolina held its annual board retreat in Fall 2020. Rather than delaying due to the pandemic, the board opted to hold a "hybrid" retreat. Some of the 13 board members attended in-person following physical distancing practices and other safety guidelines outlined by the center staff in accordance with CDC and local health guidelines, while others participated virtually.

All participants were individually logged into Zoom so all members could both see and hear each other during the retreat. External consultants assisted with the agenda design and facilitated the retreat so that all board members could actively participate.

The board chair, other officers, and CEO collaborated with the consultants to develop the following objectives for the retreat:

1. Deepen board member relationships

2. Identify key values and ground rules for the board (pandemic and beyond)

3. Identify action steps the board can use to continue to govern effectively as the pandemic continues

Key lessons learned from the retreat that might be helpful to other health center boards are outlined below:

- Many board members were surprised that an "unconventional" retreat could be effective—Many board members entered the retreat with reservations but were surprised by how engaging a "hybrid retreat" could be for the group.

- Board members appreciated having time to connect personally—Board members reported that board meetings have been—by necessity—efficient and focused on urgent and ongoing business. The board had not had true "social time" since the onset of the pandemic. The retreat allowed for each board member to share the impact of the pandemic on them personally, which resulted in meaningful and honest discussion.

- Discussions were intentionally structured to allow each board member to share their thoughts— The board had a mix of quieter and more outspoken board members. The ground rules for the day established that it was important to hear from all members. During discussions, board members were asked to consider a question and then each member was asked to share their thoughts. One board member remarked that she really felt "heard" during the retreat.

- Changes in the moment allowed the retreat to adapt as needed for the group—The agenda for the retreat originally planned for "breakout rooms" for small group discussions. However, the board members were so happy to have informal and future-focused discussion time that the agenda changed in the moment to harness the momentum of the large group. The board leveraged external facilitators for the day who were able to make such adjustments. The agenda had several breaks that allowed for time to make these types of small adjustments.

- Health center staff provided important technical support to board members during the retreat—Health center staff helped board members access Zoom and worked with board members that experienced technological challenges. This was critical to the overall success of the retreat.