**VIRTUAL FAMILY MEETINGS - TIP SHEET**

**Susquehanna Valley Mediation**

**sjordan@svmediation.org**

**713 Bridge Street, Suite 3, Selinsgrove PA 17870**

\*The below features are on the Zoom platform. Other virtual meeting platforms have similar features, although the names may be different.

**Before Family Meeting Options:**

* Facilitator should close all extra windows on their computer. This will assure: 1) best possible bandwidth; and 2) maintain privacy, especially if they choose to share their screen.
* Enable the VIRTUAL WAITING ROOM which allows the facilitator to give permission for people to enter the mtg. It also allows everyone to enter the room at the same time. Facilitator may send messages to the parties in the waiting room to let them know that they are seen and about how long the wait will be.
* We use the VIRTUAL WAITING ROOM as our main security feature, and do not require passwords. We have found that the password feature can be an extra barrier for people unfamiliar with Zoom.
* Disable PRIVATE CHAT, keep PUBLIC CHAT enabled, for use mostly for tech issues (There may be exceptions to this if there are safety concerns and people have still chosen to mediate).
* SECURITY feature - LOCK ROOM once everyone arrives to avoid having unknown people enter the meeting.
* Make sure people have both the video link and the info for the phone-in option. For some people with bandwidth issues, they may switch to phone-in option during the session.
* Facilitator or tech support may RENAME people as they arrive, to make sure they are correctly named on the screen. Some people are not correctly named, at first. This is especially important for those calling in by phone. Zoom will only show their phone number. To RENAME someone, click on the three small dots in the upper right-hand corner of their video window and select RENAME. Participants may also RENAME themselves.
* SOUND - All facilitators and parties should know where the microphone on their device is and avoid covering it.
* LIGHTING - facilitators should avoid backlighting (do not sit in front of a window). It helps to do a test run to check your lighting.
* DEVICE - Facilitator should preferably have a laptop or desktop. Facilitator should avoid using a phone, if possible. It is difficult to see all parties on a phone.
* It is helpful to have a tech support person on to help start each call, make sure everyone is comfortable. If the mediator(s) are comfortable with playing that role, one of them can be that person.
* Ground Rules/Guidelines - talk with parties about the unique nature of virtual meetings during intake. Ask if they have any ground rules that would help their experience.

**During Family Meeting:**

* Ground Rules/Guidelines - Ask group if they would like to set up ground rules/guidelines for the meeting. Are there things that would be helpful to them? We don’t get the same kinds of cues about whose turn it is to speak. These are also discussed with case manager prior to meeting.
* Facilitator should use GALLERY VIEW feature so they can see all parties at the same time. The facilitator is paying attention to non-verbal cues of those who are listening as well as speaking.
* If the facilitator finds it distracting to see his/herself, they can choose to select HIDE MYSELF on the screen.
* Use BREAKOUT ROOMS for separate sessions/caucuses with or without the facilitator(s).
* When writing family plans, facilitator *may* SHARE SCREEN so the parties can see what they are writing in real time (not all facilitators prefer this, but it’s an option).
* Facilitator should use “MUTE” very sparingly. It is a powerful signal to “mute” a person. It should be done only if you are getting loud feedback, the party doesn’t know how to mute themselves, many people are talking at once for a prolonged period and no one can hear anyone.

**Facilitating Conversation/Conflict Remotely**

* The Facilitator Opening is very important during Virtual Sessions. It should include any tech instructions or issues and any other process issues that are different in a virtual environment. It can also be helpful to acknowledge how new and different this shift to online meetings can feel. Parties may need more clarification about intention, tone of voice, etc. since we will not have the benefit of being in the same room and reading full body language. Also acknowledge that technical glitches like lags, frozen screens, volume issues, etc. can and often do complicate interpretation and lead to misunderstandings. You may also mention that silence can be confusing during a session. Sometimes people are silent because they need to think, other times it’s because their computer is frozen. Encourage parties to ask for clarification and share any concerns or hesitations.
* Prefacing interventions by using party names is often necessary, and using the person’s name more frequently, as people can’t always tell to whom the facilitator is speaking.
* More reflection is sometimes necessary because people can’t always hear one another, literally.
* Facilitators may need to do more check-ins about the process, eg. About whether people can hear one another, whether anyone is waiting/wanting to speak.
* Full transparency is critical, it’s ok/important to name the technical challenges, what’s happening in the “room” etc. It’s important for the mediator to not make assumptions about what people are thinking/doing.
* Allowing silence during the meeting is often a deliberate choice a facilitator makes. In a virtual environment, silence can sometimes be confusing. People aren’t sure if someone is having bandwidth issues or just has nothing to say. There is more uncertainty about it.
* If there are bandwidth issues, it can alter our perception, making it difficult for the facilitator to accurately reflect/mirror a person’s words and emotions.
* Video chats have been shown to inhibit trust because people can’t look one another in the eye. Depending on the camera angle, people may appear to be looking up or down or to the side. Viewers may then perceive them as uninterested, shifty, haughty, or guilty. For this reason, law scholars and criminal justice activists have questioned the fairness of remote depositions, hearings and trials. Be very aware of your own biases and judgments about a person’s non-verbal cues.

**Ethics/Confidentiality**

* Make sure the facilitator participates from a confidential location, doesn’t have people walking through the room.
* It is more difficult for facilitators to assess capacity issues (impairment, etc.)
* As part of opening statement, let people know they do not have permission to record the meeting, and check-in/ask participants to disclose if anyone else is, or might later be in the room with them.
* If one of the parties has someone in the room, mediators should check in with the other parties about it. Is it ok? The parties have the choice to end the mediation if they aren’t ok with it. The decision is in the hands of the parties. If they are not bothered by it, the meeting continues.

**Domestic Violence**

* Case manager should continue screening practices for domestic violence before the family meeting takes place.
* Facilitators should be mindful of safety if parties are in the same house during the family meeting.
* Facilitators should always respect party choice about how they are participating.
* Facilitators should stick to the model and not try to “uncover” abuse during a meeting.
* Case manager should talk through safety considerations with the party in advance of the mediation and make an if/then plan, if needed.

**Some Pros of Virtual Family Meetings**

* People call in from where they’re comfortable.
* Facilitators can see their own faces and work to modify or improve their nonverbal communication skills.
* Unlike a phone conference, using a platform like Zoom makes it easier to identify/include people by name who are attending by phone.
* If there are issues around personal safety, parties do not have to be in the same room.
* Parents can attend from home without having to pay for child care.
* If parties do not have access to transportation or have mobility issues, virtual mediations are much more accessible.
* Virtual Meetings give members of family networks the experience of connecting virtually, which may help them do so again.

**Some Cons of Virtual Mediation**

* Connectivity issues make communication more difficult.
* Parties may not have equal access to technology such as Wi-Fi and mobile devices.
* There is a greater possibility mediators will miss non-verbal cues.
* Less confidence about confidentiality-- there is no guarantee that parties are the only ones able to see their screens. Proper security measures must be taken on Zoom.
* There could be a challenge, for some mediators, about the tension between being directive about technical issues and non-directive about the parties’ conversation.
  + Mediators may sometimes need to be (more) directive about “calling on parties” - or making sure people are able to speak/finish a thought before others jump in.
* If parents don’t have childcare, the children are more likely to observe the session.
* Some people may drink alcohol during the mediation, which, for some people, can cause them to be more volatile.
* People are often more easily distracted during a session by texting, other people coming in and out of the room, etc.

**Other Issues:**

* Google docs works well for file sharing between office/facilitators.
* Need a good system in place with file sharing and saving.
* Extra training is required to review features of zoom and the file sharing system. Mediators don’t know what they don't know.
* Zoom role play groups can be an effective way to prepare facilitators for meetings.