

# **Aging and Disability Resource Centers: Best Practices for Local Advisory Groups**

**June 2017**

---

## **Aging and Disability Resource Centers: Local Advisory Group Best Practices**

Aging and Disability Resource Centers (ADRCs) are required to establish and maintain a local advisory group to assist the ADRC with program development and implementation, as well as service improvement. In September 2016, Texas Health and Human Services (HHS) conducted a survey of the 22 ADRCs in Texas to learn how their local advisory groups were set up. The information that follows is a compilation of the results of that survey and includes generally accepted best practices (i.e., efficient and effective techniques and methods) for advisory groups.

### **Advisory Group Focus/Scope**

The primary purpose of the ADRC local advisory group is to bring expertise and perspective to the work of the ADRC. It is up to each ADRC to determine how to structure and support its advisory group according to contractual parameters and local considerations. Determining the scope within which the group will operate helps to define the ADRC's expectations and provides members direction and focus. While the advisory group may discuss and make recommendations to the ADRC, it does not have decision-making authority. However, the ADRC should regularly communicate to group members how their input is used in making decisions, so members know their work is valued and seriously considered.

### **Advisory Group Composition and Selection Process**

*Group Composition:* In Texas, representatives from the ADRC partner agencies (i.e., the local Area Agencies on Aging (AAAs), the Local Intellectual and Developmental Disability Authorities (LIDDAs), and the local HHS offices) are required members of the ADRC advisory group, as are representatives from service providers and other area stakeholders (e.g., managed care organizations, home health agencies, transportation providers, and housing developers).

Advisory groups should also include individuals representing all of the populations ADRCs target for services, including:

- Individuals who are older;
- Individuals with intellectual, developmental and/or physical disabilities;
- Individuals with chronic diseases;
- Family caregivers;
- Veterans;
- Families with children who have special needs; and
- Other individuals planning for future long-term services and supports (LTSS).

Based on the survey results, recruiting members from these groups has been challenging for nearly half of the 22 ADRCs. The following table shows the number of advisory groups that include the targeted populations.

<b>Representatives from Targeted Populations</b>	<b># Advisory Groups</b>
Caregivers	13
Individuals with Disabilities	13
Minority Populations	10
Older Adults	14
Veterans	11

Advisory groups are most effective when they are representative of the overall population in the ADRC's service area. Giving consideration to cultural, racial, age and gender demographics will contribute to a more diverse and dynamic advisory group. As one ADRC survey respondent stated, "We have a varied age/race group of individuals representing [local] organizations...as well as private citizens who advocate on behalf of those we serve."

In addition to group composition, ADRCs must also determine the number of members they will seek to maintain in their advisory groups. In doing so, the ADRC should ensure it has the administrative capacity to effectively manage the group so all members have input and meetings are productive.

Survey results show the number of members in advisory groups varies significantly throughout the state, perhaps due in part to the different sizes of service areas and their unique characteristics. Over a third of Texas ADRCs have 6-10 members in their advisory groups, while another 27 percent have 11-15 members. Three ADRCs have advisory groups with 16-20 members, and the other five have committees comprised of 21 or more members.

***Selection Process:*** It is important to have advisory members who are committed to the ADRC's mission and willing to take the time to provide thoughtful advice and recommendations. Establishing a formal selection process enables the ADRC to vet potential members and assess how they can contribute to the overall effectiveness of the group.

Another recruitment strategy is to have existing members and partner agencies recommend or nominate potential new members. This process encourages members to actively participate in identifying qualified individuals based on the focus and goals of the group.

According to the survey results, a third of ADRCs have a formal selection process established to vet advisory group members. Another third accepts recommendations or nominations from existing members, county judges, and other partner agencies. However, the final third does not appear to have an established process for identifying advisory group members.

The table below shows the various agencies represented on Texas ADRC advisory groups.

<b>Organization</b>	<b># ADRCs</b>
HHS Regional Offices	20
Area Agency on Aging	21
Local Mental Health Authority	17
Centers for Independent Living	17
2-1-1	2
City and/or County	2
Department of Family and Protective Services	12
Home Health Care Organizations	1
Local Hospitals	2
Local Housing Authority	2
Managed Care Organizations	20
Meals on Wheels/Food Pantries	20
Postsecondary Institutions (med/nursing schools; social work, etc.)	3
Social Security Administration	2
Texas Legal Services	1
Transportation Providers	3
Veterans Services (VA hospitals, clinics, advocacy groups, etc.)	6

***New Member Orientation:*** When new members join an ADRC advisory group, it is a best practice to provide them an orientation about the ADRC program and participation in the advisory group. An ADRC survey respondent stated, “[Advisory group members] must be interested in the success of your program and get engaged in the council.” At a minimum, new members should be provided information on the following:

- The purpose of the ADRC and the populations it is mandated to serve.
- The array of services provided through the ADRC.
- Partnerships already established with other organizations and those the ADRC seeks to develop.
- The mission of the advisory group and member requirements.
- How information and advice from the advisory group assists the ADRC in developing, implementing and improving program services.
- Clarification that the advisory group does not have decision-making authority, but is an integral part of helping the ADRC shape its program.

### **Member Term Limits**

It is important for an advisory group to remain viable and engaged, and for the ADRC to continuously assess the health and effectiveness of the group. Establishing term limits for members can result in a more dynamic advisory group and the infusion of new ideas and varied perspectives.

While setting term limits is considered a best practice for advisory groups, it can also result in the loss of institutional knowledge and may impact important business relationships. Further, it may not be feasible for ADRCs serving rural areas or areas where resources may be more limited.

Survey results show only two ADRCs have set term limits for advisory group members (both for one-year periods), while the remaining 19 ADRCs have not established any limits or have not determined what limit should be set. This is an important consideration for ensuring an advisory group remains active and engaged, and ADRCs are encouraged to explore implementing this best practice. However, if an ADRC decides not to establish term limits, a method of regularly assessing members and the overall health of the advisory group should be developed and implemented. This process should not only provide feedback to the members, but should also include a procedure for removing members due to poor performance, poor attendance, or other concerns.

### **Formal Operating Procedures/Bylaws**

Another important best practice for local advisory groups is the development and maintenance of written operating procedures or bylaws. This set of rules provides members of the advisory group a framework to guide them in conducting business. It also defines expectations for how members will perform their roles and actions the group may take if members do not meet those expectations. An advisory group’s bylaws typically address the following topics, although ADRCs may choose to include other elements:

- Name of the advisory group
- Purpose and areas of focus
- Composition of the group and term limits
- Selection process for group members

- Selection of a chair and/or other functional designations (e.g., subcommittee leads)
- Process for resignations and removal of group members
- Meeting structure and procedures
- Filling vacancies for unexpired terms

Only half of Texas ADRCs have bylaws or some other form of written guidance. For those that have already established bylaws, it is always a good idea to engage the advisory group in reviewing them and making any recommendations for improvement. ADRCs that do not have written guidelines may consider collaborating with their advisory groups to develop them. This process is an excellent way of building the team and providing members a sense of ownership.

### **Advisory Group Meetings**

*Meeting Frequency:* The frequency with which ADRCs convene their advisory groups is something that should be decided in conjunction with the group members themselves. Common timeframes include monthly, every other month, or quarterly, depending on the size of the group, the tasks they are working on, and other issues that may impact this decision (e.g., size of service area).

The majority of Texas ADRC advisory groups (14) meet quarterly, which can be frequent enough to enable members to contribute meaningfully to the important work ADRCs do, but not become burdensome. Other ADRCs choose to have their advisory groups convene either monthly or every other month, which can be helpful when an ADRC is implementing new programming, expanding services, or when there is a need for more frequent input from its members.

*Subcommittees:* Some advisory groups may choose to create subcommittees to work on specific tasks and report back to the entire advisory group with its findings and recommendations. This enables the ADRC to leverage the expertise of its different group members, address multiple areas of focus simultaneously, and maximize the time spent in regular meetings.

ADRCs may decide to have standing subcommittees or create workgroups for special, time-limited activities. A subcommittee may opt to meet more frequently than the regular advisory group meetings and can often do so via conference call or webinar. The following are examples of subcommittees formed by several Texas ADRCs:

- ADRC Activities
- Education
- Evaluation
- Funding
- Outreach and Public Awareness

*Publication of Meetings:* Survey results indicate the vast majority of ADRCs publicize their meetings via email announcement. Two ADRCs post meeting notifications with the secretary of state and local county clerks, while one uses regular mail.

*Meeting Facilitation:* Part of developing a successful advisory group is establishing basic operating guidelines. For most ADRCs, this will take the form of bylaws or meeting rules. Either way, it is important to determine who will facilitate the meetings and how the meetings will be structured. Best practice recommends the members of an advisory group appoint or elect a member to conduct the meetings in order to develop a sense of ownership; however, in other situations it may make sense for the advisory chair to conduct the meetings in conjunction with a staff person from the ADRC.

Approximately two-thirds of ADRC advisory groups are facilitated by ADRC staff members, while the other third's meetings are facilitated by an advisory chair. It is not clear if any of the meetings in the latter group are co-facilitated with ADRC staff.

*Topics of Discussion:* The services provided by ADRCs require staff to have a strong working knowledge of an array of topics, all of which contribute to identifying and sustaining long-term care for elderly adults, people with disabilities, and caregivers. A strong advisory group can be an excellent source of information and advice to help the ADRC implement effective programming.

One ADRC survey respondent stated they, “have invited guests as presenters at every meeting.” This is a very effective way of keeping your advisory members informed and up to date on relevant topics. In addition, it is recommended best practice to regularly revisit the goals of your advisory group. As another respondent stated, “One topic we discuss often is direction and purpose.”

The list below shows the range of topics covered by Texas ADRC advisory groups in their regular meetings:

- ADRC Bylaws/Operations/Policies and Procedures
- ADRC Orientation/Core Functions/Updates
- ADRC Strategic Plan
- Affordable Housing
- Budget/Funding Opportunities
- Call Volume
- Children with Disabilities
- Healthcare Issues
- Implementation of Local or Regional Plan/Goal Setting
- Local Collaboration/Coordination with Other Agencies
- Local Community Events/Initiatives
- Local Community Issues (e.g., rural challenges and resource gaps)
- LTSS Screen
- Managed Care Organizations (including STAR+PLUS)
- Medicaid/Medicare
- Options Counseling
- Outreach/Education/Public Awareness
- Performance Reports/Metrics
- Rates for Services
- Required and Community Partners
- Respite
- Set-up of Subcommittees
- Specialized Information and Referral
- Staffing Issues
- Transportation/Mobility Options
- Veteran Services/Resources

## **Attendance at Meetings**

Ideally, advisory groups consist of committed individuals who understand the importance of the organization's mission and can contribute to its success. A large part of that commitment is attendance at advisory group meetings and participation in the group's activities.

In general, attendance at ADRC advisory group meetings appears to be good; however, it is unclear how ADRCs track attendance. Best practice recommends that all group members sign an attendance sheet at the beginning of the meeting and that the ADRC maintains these to monitor members' participation.

It is incumbent upon the ADRC to address concerns about attendance with group members. Each advisory group member was selected or nominated because they could contribute something of value to the ADRC and, indirectly, to the ADRC's customers. When members do not follow through on their commitment to participate in advisory group meetings, that value is lost. In essence that member is occupying an advisory group position that another person could fill and from whom the ADRC and advisory group could benefit. The recurring absence of a group member can have an unintended effect on those members who attend regularly. They may feel resentful that the absent member does not appear to take the meetings seriously and question the importance of participation if the ADRC does not address the problem.

Fortunately, the majority of ADRCs believe most of their advisory members are committed to the group. As one ADRC survey respondent put it, "Our local advisory group is very supportive and involved in our advisory meetings. They consistently attend and if unable always send representation."

## **Other Best Practices to Consider**

Survey results indicated ADRCs generally view their advisory groups favorably. Over 95 percent rated their advisory groups as "knowledgeable," which is a good indicator that their members have the expertise to provide meaningful input. In addition, the majority of ADRCs stated their advisory group meetings are a good venue for information exchange between the ADRC and its members. They each share information from both the local and state levels so group members can then disseminate it to their staff.

Best Practice	Questions to Consider	Other Thoughts
<p>The advisory group has written operating procedures for meeting structure, expectations of group members, and terms of service.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ If procedures already exist, how effective are they?</li> <li>▪ Are all members aware of the procedures?</li> <li>▪ Have they had the opportunity to review and make recommendations for improvement?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Written procedures should be living documents that are updated on a regular basis.</li> <li>▪ Engaging your members in this process ensures they have a voice in structuring how the advisory group operates.</li> </ul>
<p>Group members have an in-depth understanding of ADRC operations and the role they will play in assisting the ADRC.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Do your group members receive a thorough orientation on the ADRC’s mission, who they serve, and the array of services they provide?</li> <li>▪ Are your advisory group members clear about what you want from them?</li> <li>▪ Are they aware of local/community issues that may affect how services are provided?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Advisory groups need guidance and direction from ADRC staff so they can purposefully participate in advisory activities.</li> <li>▪ By providing written information about your program, group members will be able to offer more meaningful suggestions during the meetings and also have something to refer to later.</li> </ul>
<p>All advisory group members’ thoughts and recommendations are considered by the ADRC, even when there is not unanimous agreement.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ How do you obtain feedback from your advisory group?</li> <li>▪ How is discussion facilitated so that each group member is heard?</li> <li>▪ Are members with dissenting opinions given equal opportunity to express their thoughts?</li> </ul>	<p>Your advisory group members were recruited because of their expertise, but they may not always agree on an issue. It is just as important to hear the concerns of the minority, as they may identify aspects that most need to be considered by the ADRC.</p>
<p>An important part of sustaining an effective advisory group is ensuring members have a sense of purpose and feel appreciated.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Do you regularly update your advisory group on how their work has contributed to the ADRC’s progress?</li> <li>▪ How often do you meaningfully thank your advisory group members for their time and work?</li> <li>▪ How do you show your appreciation?</li> </ul>	<p>There lots of ways to thank group members that take little time, but can be very meaningful. Something as simple as a handwritten note or snacks at the meetings is always appreciated.</p>