



Office of Information Technology Services

Innovation That Matters... For All New Yorkers



New York State Workers' Compensation Board and New York State Office of Information Technology Services Virtual Hearings Center Program

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Executive Summary

The Virtual Hearings Center (VHC) allows hearing participants to attend workers' compensation hearings over a computer or mobile device, in a secure, reliable and convenient manner, rather than in-person at a hearing location. This especially benefits injured workers who may have difficulty traveling to hearings.

A cross-agency project between the Workers' Compensation Board (Board) and the Office of Information Technology Services (ITS), VHC represents a major paradigm shift in how New York holds compensation hearings. This first-in-the-nation initiative supports more than 1,200 hearings daily.

The internet-based queuing system, combined with the seamless integration of Cisco WebEx/ Collaboration Meeting Rooms (CMR) and the Board's backend Claims system, produces high-quality, on-time hearings that support both in-person and virtual attendance.

In addition to providing convenience to injured workers, VHC has resulted in the postponement of fewer hearings, which has enabled prompt resolution of claim issues and faster payment of benefits to injured workers.

The Board promotes VHC through email, printed posters and flyers, guides for injured workers, attorneys/licensed representatives, witnesses and other participants, and online videos targeting injured workers and attorneys/licensed representatives. The Board posts videos on its website to show groups how to log on and attend hearings virtually as well as walk them through the new in-person experience.

The Board notifies injured workers about virtual hearings through the website and the hearing notice sent to their homes. The Board also issues online surveys at the end of each virtual hearing and uses in-person surveys to gather feedback.

You can access more information on VHC at:

<http://www.wcb.ny.gov/virtual-hearings/>

<https://vhc.wcb.ny.gov/>

<https://its.ny.gov/press-release/new-york-workers-compensation-board>

Concept

The VHC design combines many technologies to offer a wholly unique experience for all stakeholders. Features include:

- High-definition video and audio communication between the administrative law judge (ALJ) and all hearing participants;
- Flexibility, as the solution is available from anywhere on the Internet;
- Multi-channel designs (web and iOS app) have the same consistent look and feel, leveraging an extremely simple, intuitive user interface with built-in online help;
- Participant virtual check-in, waiting room and communication, and ability to mark themselves as temporarily unavailable;
- The ability to bring participants into the virtual hearing room and return them to the virtual waiting room;
- Document sharing;
- A full ALJ dashboard that enables ALJs to view participants' virtual status, including attendance, presence, and location, and control the virtual hearing operation, including ability to start, stop, and recall hearings with full knowledge of participant availability;
- A customer service representative dashboard that facilitates virtual communication, monitoring, and participant check-in;
- Real-time synchronization of thousands of hearings between the Board calendar, Cisco WebEx/CMR virtual meeting space, and the queueing solution;
- Hearing attendance functionality shared real-time between the queueing solution and the Board's internal claims management system; and
- Automatic recordings of all hearings, which are stored on the New York State network for later review by the Board, providing the official hearing record.

Because of these features, several other New York State agencies that conduct hearings are interested in implementing this technology for their own hearing operations. Several other private and public entities have also contacted the Board to inquire about the solution.

The Board/Virtual Hearings team engaged in an extensive outreach campaign to educate potential virtual hearing participants. Ahead of the rollout at each location, the Board conducted educational webinars for attorneys and licensed representatives attended by more than 500 attorneys/licensed representatives. During the first two days of each rollout, the Board sent additional staff to the location to provide in-person assistance using the system to attorneys electing to appear in-person.

Significance

VHC is new to the Board and is an internet-based solution accessible from standard web browsers and the iOS App store. The system is completely integrated with Cisco WebEx/CMR and the Board's backend enterprise Claims Information System (CIS), leveraging numerous CIS datasets including but not limited to cases, parties of interest, and hearings.

The most significant innovation for this project was the development of a custom internet based Virtual Waiting Room/Queuing solution for external parties (available via browser and the iOS App), coupled with the development of the ALJ backend hearing dashboard. The combination of these two components transformed the workers' compensation hearing process in New York State. The real-time dynamic tracking and continuous monitoring of participant availability has resulted in tremendous efficiency gains daily for the thousands of parties involved.

Foundational to the innovation VHC delivers is the mandated design of a highly secure, robust, scalable, and resilient platform in supporting a daily workload of 1,200 hearings involving over 5,000 end-users on multiple device types.

Prior to the implementation of VHC, most of the Board's ALJs and all hearing participants were required to be physically present at their hearings. Now, all participants choosing to appear remotely can see and hear each other using high-definition video and audio over the Internet. The system continuously tracks parties' availability throughout the day and notifies judges when hearings can be called.

VHC also records individual hearings and can provide a hearing recording to parties without charge. This feature allows the Board to phase out digital audio recording devices, which required staff testing and were often problematic.

Impact

Virtual hearings are a game changer for the citizens of New York State, and showcase New York's commitment to digital government transformation. The injured workers and their representatives rely on the Board to resolve claim disputes and ensure the prompt delivery of medical and indemnity benefits to injured workers. The hearing process plays a vital role in the resolution of disputes. Prior to virtual hearings, injured workers often traveled many miles to a Board hearing location for their hearings which, on average, last only 10-15 minutes. VHC eliminates the burdens of travel and missed time from work, and allows injured workers, attorneys/representatives, witnesses, and other participants to attend hearings online from the comfort and convenience of their home or office. This digital transformation introduces superior service levels never available before. Most importantly, VHC has resulted in fewer postponed hearings, resulting in the prompt resolution of claim issues and faster delivery of benefits to injured workers.

Since the initial VHC implementation in October 2017, the Board has conducted more than 209,000 virtual hearings with a current 45 percent virtual participation rate. VHC has also reduced the need to reschedule hearings. The usage rate is about 1,200 hearings conducted daily involving up to 5,000 users.

The Board issues online and in-person surveys to gather feedback to help improve the service. To date, the Board has received feedback from more than 1,500 citizens leading to changes such as providing a telephone number to allow for pre-conferencing, simplifying the sign in process for associated cases, and maintaining attorneys' information so they don't have to keep re-entering it. Feedback from the injured workers attending virtually has been overwhelmingly positive. Here are a few examples:

"It was amazing to not have to suffer the long ride to the actual building."

"Totally awesome! This should have been invented years ago. Makes attending a meeting pleasurable and does not pose scheduling conflicts."

"I live in Florida. It was such a good experience to be at the hearing through virtual hearing. It saves me money and stress. Thank you."

"It was incredibly simple and very convenient! I really appreciate this option!"

In-person surveys have helped the Board determine why claimants and attorneys may have chosen to attend hearings in-person rather than virtually.

The Board has updated the guides and videos posted on its website to reflect changes to the system made based on citizens' feedback.

The Board has recently published a promotional video containing citizens' feedback on social media and the Board website, where citizens and businesses will be able to see comments shared in online surveys.

You can access the video here:

<http://www.wcb.ny.gov/virtual-hearings/>