

NALC branches improvise to hold meetings during COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has created many new challenges for carriers. Among them is how branches can hold meetings, whether of their executive boards, with shop stewards or even for the general membership.

That was the question facing New Jersey Merged Branch 38 President **Michael O'Neill**. Some answers were delivered by his grown daughter, who lives with him and who, as a teacher, had to learn new ways of reaching her students. One of the tools her school used was Zoom, an online video conferencing service that has been widely used during the pandemic.

"You have all these kids on the screen at the same time," he said. So, he asked her, "How do you do it?"

She taught him, and he started doing staff meetings among the six full-time officers of his branch as well as the slightly larger executive board.

The branch canceled its April and May in-person general meetings, and

while it doesn't traditionally hold meetings in the summer, there was some branch business that needed to be dealt with, including a merger and some changes to branch bylaws.

So they tried Zoom for a full membership meeting. O'Neill was pleased that the meeting drew 114 attendees.

"I was really nervous," O'Neill said. But he started the meeting with everyone muted, and the software had tools that helped the meeting run smoothly. He was able to share his computer screen, which showed the bylaws changes and the merger resolutions.

Attendees could push a button to raise their hands, and a polling tool helped keep track of votes. "We got our votes and we got a great, great response from it," he said.

Because the branch was still learning the system, he told his members that if they had any questions, they should give him a traditional phone call at a separate time.

Branch 38 hasn't used it just for branch meetings. O'Neill recently

used Zoom for a labor-management meeting in one of the small offices. With 65 stations in the branch, and some of them quite small, the teleconferencing system has proved helpful for certain aspects of union work.

One of the country's first confirmed cases of COVID-19 occurred in New Rochelle, NY. Hudson Valley Merged, NY Branch 137 President **Joe DeStefano** and other branch leaders were on their way back from regional training in New Jersey when they learned of the case, which meant that they couldn't hold in-person meetings.

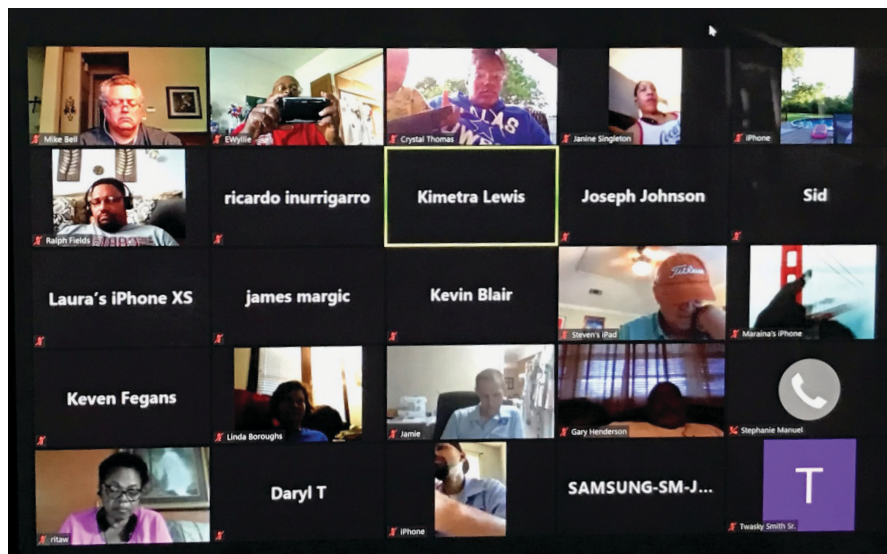
As DeStefano recounted, "Right away we were asking ourselves, 'How are we going to communicate with our members?'"

Friends outside of the Postal Service recommended Zoom as the service to use. DeStefano decided to use the free trial to test it out with a couple of people from the branch and quickly, he says, "we saw how it could be beneficial."

The branch has 63 offices and 1,300 members, but with a limit of 100 attendees on the Zoom meeting, the leaders had to be creative. "What we decided to do was invite shop stewards, alternate stewards and safety personnel, whoever can make whatever meeting, to come on the meeting and we will get the information out to the offices that way," DeStefano said. "During a pandemic, it was really important for us to do that because we were getting daily information."

DeStefano also participated in video teleconferences with another service called Webex, often with district managers. He would take that information to his branch's Zoom meetings and return with updated information for the district meetings the next day.

A Dallas Branch 132 meeting held via Zoom



NALC President Fredric Rolando has attended some branch meetings held remotely during the pandemic.

“During the height of this pandemic, it was working tremendously for us,” he said.

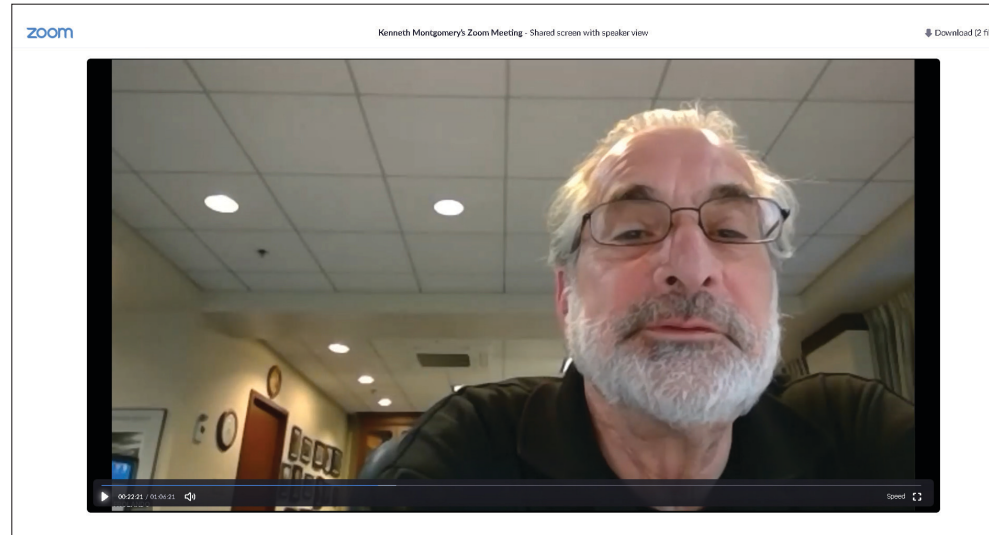
Though the coronavirus information took precedence, the branch leaders decided to look for information on other topics that they could get out through the new tool. They invited Region 15 National Business Agent Larry Cirelli to speak one week, and after that was a success, they asked NALC President Fredric Rolando to attend.

“He came on,” DeStefano said. “He spent a little over two hours with our carriers, which was great because we had a lot of people who have never been exposed to national officers. Really, it’s put a spark into the whole branch.”

NALC Executive Vice President Brian Renfroe attended the next week. “People were able to directly ask him a question and have a conversation,” DeStefano said. The branch has since invited its congressional representatives, as well as the district manager.

“[Members] got to see the aspect of what I’m dealing with at the district. And they got to put some of their concerns out there,” he said. “And for the district manager, it was good for him, too, because if he hears me making all the complaints, it becomes white noise after a while. But now he got to see it from the people. And now when he goes into offices, people go up to him and say they saw him on the Zoom meeting and now [they have] someone [they feel] comfortable talking to.”

Lincoln, NE Branch 8 has been using Zoom for branch meetings as well. “It’s worked fine,” Branch President **Sion Odom** said. “We still hold voice votes. We still do everything like we normally do. We’re just doing it on the app.”



While Odom simply gives the login information to his stewards to get the information out to active members, the branch has been mailing the information to retirees or members who are harder to reach.

One of the challenges for branches using the technology is how to make it easy for people to ask questions without overwhelming the branch leaders running the new technology. For Branch 8, Odom has the sergeant-at-arms watch for people who push a button to raise their hand at the meeting. The sergeant-at-arms will get the full question in the chat and let Odom know that there’s a question.

Members seem to have responded positively to the new approach. “We’ve actually had numbers that I haven’t seen at regular meetings,” Odom said. “We have a couple of towns that are about 25 minutes or an hour away. So we’ve had a few people join us from there.”

In addition, Branch 8 has used the tool for a special city carrier assistant meeting with only the branch president and vice president. “They could ask questions and then we can give them answers.”

The branch is thinking of continuing using the technology in some capacity

even after in-person meetings can once again be held.

Rochester, NY Branch 210 has held meetings on Zoom, too. The stewards in each station post a notice on the bulletin board about the meeting. Members then email Branch 210 President **Kenny Montgomery** to obtain the link and password to attend.

“The meeting progresses normally with motions and votes of those in attendance as long as there is a quorum,” Montgomery said. The secretary takes attendance and anonymous attendees are not allowed.

As of June 4, the branch had held three meetings and a special legislative meeting using Zoom. Montgomery says he likes the tools the system has.

“The nice part about Zoom is you can set up the account with everyone muted when they enter the room and it allows them to unmute themselves when needed,” he said. “Also, you can share documents on screen, like financial reports.”

The only problem he reported was the occasional member with a bad connection who could not be heard. But the benefits have outweighed the problems, as using this tool has allowed the branch to host Region 11 NBA Mark

Camilli and President Rolando on the teleconference.

Not everyone wants to use video, so Dayton, OH Branch 182 President **John Oross** decided to use teleconferencing for some special town hall-style question-and-answer sessions. “It was free and easy to use,” Oross explained of the decision.

The meeting was well attended, with 140 people, and it went well, he said. “It was just giving them an update on everything that’s going on.”

To enhance the experience using technology, he asks people to text him questions they have and then he reads them aloud, rather than having a lot of voices on the line at one time.

He’s used the system for steward meetings as well, starting sometime around April, and though it’s worked fine, he still is deciding how the branch will use it in the future. “I’m a dinosaur. I’m the old kind of guy, the

old-school union man,” Oross said. “But I realized in the comments [I heard] after, that a lot of the new carriers like it.”

With the branch starting to open up and hold meetings with social distancing, he plans to try an in-person meeting at 6:30 p.m. with a follow-up teleconference at 8 p.m., where he’ll recap the meeting for those who did not attend.

For those who are thinking of using a system like Zoom, both Branch 8 President Odom and Branch 38 President O’Neill recommended watching instructional videos and holding some practice meetings. “I would normally be afraid of [something like this],” O’Neill said. “But once you get into it, it’s not that hard at all.”

Branch 137 President DeStefano advised taking baby steps. “I tried jumping into certain things too fast, like I tried to do a PowerPoint presentation.

Yeah, I had some technical difficulties. It’s still a learning process. We’ve been doing it for a couple months and I learn something new every week,” he said.

Another problem can be what is heard by members. On one meeting, they could hear an attendee using the bathroom. “It’s an adventure each week,” DeStefano said, laughing.

All of those interviewed said that using technology to hold these meetings at a time when people cannot gather because of pandemic-related social-distancing requirements has been a benefit for their members.

“If we didn’t have it, I don’t know what we’d be doing right now,” O’Neill said, “because I’m trying to keep as many of our people out of our office building as possible.”

“Hopefully we won’t have to do [this] in September,” he said of using Zoom for branch meetings in the fall. “But we’re prepared for it.” **PR**

NALC launches Stamp Out Hunger Donor Drive



LETTER CARRIERS' DONOR DRIVE

For the last 27 years, the National Association of Letter Carriers has been proud to hold the Stamp Out Hunger Food Drive, the nation’s largest one-day food drive, on the second Saturday in May.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, NALC wasn’t able to safely collect and distribute food in May this year. However, the union will schedule the 28th annual Stamp Out Hunger Food Drive when it is safe to do so.

“In the meantime, the need for food assistance is more urgent than ever, and we want to give everyone the opportunity to continue to help meet that need,” NALC President Fredric Rolando said.

Anyone can go to nalc.org/food to find a list of food banks in any state. From there, you can pick a food bank in your community, click the link and make a donation. It’s that easy.

“The Stamp Out Hunger Food Drive is a drive with a single mission—to feed the hungry in America, and as always, with your help, we will,” President Rolando said.

Food drive coordinators can find resources to help them raise awareness about the donor drive in their local communities on the NALC website. **PR**