

TELEPHONE HOTLINES AND WEB-BASED FORUMS

A telephone hotline is a toll-free or local number that people can call to ask questions and obtain information on RCRA activities. Web-based forums may include websites or social media accounts that are similarly dedicated to receiving and answering questions from the public.

A hotline or web-based forum can provide the members of the public with a relatively quick means of expressing their concerns directly to EPA and getting their questions answered. This quick response can help reassure callers that their concerns are heard. These methods also can help monitor community concerns. For example, a sudden increase in calls or inquiries could indicate that additional public participation efforts may be warranted.

Required activity?

No.

Level of Effort: Hotlines and/or web-based forums may require several hours a day responding to inquiries if there is high or moderate interest in the facility's RCRA activities.

More detailed information on telephone hotlines, web-based forums, and other public participation activities for use at various stages of the RCRA process can be found in Chapter 5 of the [2016 Edition of the RCRA Public Participation Manual](#).

Making it Work

When to Use

A telephone hotline and/or web-based forum may be used:

- When community interest or concern is moderate or high;
- When emergencies or unexpected events occur, or when a situation is changing rapidly;
- When there is a high potential for complaints (e.g., about dust or noise);
- Where literacy rates are low and written information must be supplemented; or
- Where the community is isolated and has little opportunity for face-to-face contact with project staff (e.g., rural areas, areas far from Regional offices, areas lacking broadband internet access).

How to Use

A telephone hotline and/or web-based forum can be used either as a semi-permanent fixture (available throughout the permit review or corrective action process) or as a temporary measure (installed at the time of major community feedback, such as the public comment period). When using a hotline or forum, consider the following:

- **Staffing.** Assign one or more staff members to handle hotline calls and respond to web-based inquiries. For the hotline, if staff are not available throughout the day, direct callers via a recording to leave their name, number, and brief statement of concern. Inform them that someone in your organization will return their call promptly. Consider using an automated phone program to provide information on commonly requested information such as meeting dates and locations and permit status. Check the voicemail and web-based forum at least once a day. If the level of concern is high, check for messages and inquiries more frequently.

- **Publicizing.** Announce the telephone hotline and web-based forum in news releases to local newspapers, radio stations, and television stations, and in fact sheets, publications, and public notices. Consider placing the phone number online and on social media, and referencing the web forum on the automated phone recording (if applicable).
- **Records.** For the telephone line, keep a record of each question, when it was received, from whom, and how and when it was answered. Respond promptly (within 24 hours) to all questions and inquiries if an answer cannot be given immediately. Be diligent in following up requests for information and tracking down accurate, direct responses.

Tips

- Respond quickly to questions or concerns; otherwise, callers and posters may become frustrated.
- If the number of calls or inquiries is large, responding quickly to each inquiry could prove burdensome to staff. In addition, calling a hotline number and receiving a recorded message could irritate or alienate some members of the public. It may be necessary to conduct additional public participation activities to address the community's concerns.
- Remember that online forums will capture only inquiries from members of the public with internet access.

Checklist for Telephone Hotlines and Web-Based Forums

- Determine need for a telephone hotline and/or web-based forum.
- Identify staff responsible for answering calls and responding to inquiries.
- Install telephone hotlines and voicemail; set up web-based forum.
- Notify interested people about the hotline and/or web-based forum, using:
 - Public notice
 - Fact sheet
 - Mailing to facility mailing list
 - Website and/or social media, as applicable
- Coordinate staffing of hotline and/or web-based forum.
- Have staff maintain a log of all calls and responses.
- Follow up on calls to hotline and posts to the forum as needed.