



Soroptimist is a global volunteer organization that provides women and girls with access to the education and training they need to achieve economic empowerment.

SOROPTIMIST INTERNATIONAL OF THE AMERICAS

Temporary Pause on Face-to-Face Meetings, Activities and Travel: Frequently Asked Questions

Background

With the global pandemic continuing, the SIA Board of Directors held a special meeting on January 7, 2021 to further review and discuss the risk of face-to-face region conferences and other face-to-face SIA sanctioned activities and travel. Risk is anything that jeopardizes the health, safety or welfare of our members or Soroptimist as an organization.

The SIA Board made the decision – effective immediately – to temporarily pause face-to-face meetings and activities authorized or sanctioned by SIA along with associated meeting travel, until further notice. This includes region conferences and other region and club meetings and activities.

The SIA Board is aware of its duty to manage the legal and financial risk of the COVID-19 worldwide pandemic and its effects on the members, staff, and other stakeholders, including our Dream Program participants and the general public. It was only after careful analysis of all relevant factors the board decided that the **ONLY** absolutely effective action was to temporarily pause all SIA face-to-face meetings, activities and events, along with related travel, until further notice.

With the spike in numbers reported on the disease throughout the federation and across the U.S., including the new variant which seems even more transmissible and insidious, there is no guarantee that compliance with local or other governmental guidelines will insulate SIA and its members, staff and stakeholders including the general public, from bodily harm or death. Only by removing the incubator-like situations of face-to-face meetings and activities. can SIA say that it is doing everything possible to protect those individuals and SIA as an organization.

The detrimental effect on SIA is clear and of great concern to the board. But when weighed against the possible exposure endangering the health and safety of all concerned, as well as the financial risk to the organization and the infected individuals, the difficult but prudent policy is to take a temporary step back from face-to-face meetings and activities.

The board also considered several other possible mitigation strategies, none of which are as effective as the temporary pause.

Please remember this is a TEMPORARY PAUSE; the federation board will continue to evaluate the changing conditions of this global pandemic and remove this temporary pause when we can all gather safely. Until that time, we will support each other and create innovative solutions so we can remain strong for the women and girls who need us.

Please see the following Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) to assist with your concerns and to help you to answer questions that may arise in your regions and clubs.

Frequently Asked Questions

Conferences and Meetings

If face-to-face meetings are temporarily paused, how should we operate?

SIA's Board encourages the use of audio or video conferencing, or live-streamed social media available via the internet to minimize the risk of infecting members; officers; SIA Board; SIA's stakeholders; employees; Dream Program and region or club project participants; and the general public around the world.

Can regions cancel or postpone their 2021 Region Conference?

Canceling or postponing region conferences is not an option in 2021. SIA's Board believes it is in the best interest of our members that a region conference is held in every region in 2021. Requests to suspend a region conference for cancellation in 2021 due to the global health pandemic is not an option per [SIA Procedure F.4](#). Region conferences should not be postponed and should be held virtually on or around the same time that they have currently been planned. We understand adjustments may need to be made – for example if your face-to-face conference was to be held for six hours each day for two or three days, moving to a virtual format will call for changes to the schedule/agenda. Additionally, it is important for all members in the federation to collectively receive the same information being provided by our Official Visitors and SIAHQ at the same time.

Because we are shifting from a face-to-face conference, what materials do Governors need to submit to SIAHQ?

The following items and due dates are noted below. Please note we have extended the original due dates given the temporary pause. Dates will be updated in the Governors Calendar and the form will be shared with Governors in their January monthly email.

- A new "2021 Region Conference Format Change Request Form": YES, due by February 5, 2021 to jill@soroptimist.org
- Conference agenda and name of the person who coordinates content: YES, due by February 19, 2021 to nicole@soroptimist.org
- Calls to Conference? YES, due by March 15, 2021 to jill@soroptimist.org

How will SIA help support financial losses that regions may incur as a result of having to cancel in-person region conferences?

SIAHQ has been successful in negotiating changes to contracts and believes it can help our regions do the same with the expertise of our professional director meetings, where necessary. Despite the experience and relationships we have built across the meeting industry, we do not expect 100% of cancellations to be cost free and thus will support reducing the financial burden as best as possible. Contact Linda Still, SIA Director Meetings (lindas@soroptimist.org) for assistance.

What are the first steps and questions to ask the hotel or venue about our contracts?

When negotiating the termination of a contract with a hotel or venue, keep in mind, terminology is important - you are “terminating a contract” and “cancelling” an event. Review the contract to understand the obligations of terminating the venue contract and what the penalties and liabilities are. Check the language that appears in your written contract regarding cancellation. If you have a “force majeure” or “impossibilities” clause – these support your contract termination. Consider the answers to the following questions and use them to support the reason why your region may be able to terminate the contract without penalty:

- Is the COVID-19 infection rate on the rise or decreasing in the destination where the meeting will be held?
- What are your local government regulations regarding gathering indoors as well as outdoors?
- Are there travel restrictions that limit the freedom of members to freely cross state, province, or country borders?
- Would the hotel allow you to rebook the contracted 2021 Region Conference for your 2022 Region Conference without financial penalty?
- What are the local social distancing guidelines as well as those recommended by the World Health Organization, the Centers for Disease Control, or local government authority or health agencies?
- Is the hotel or venue able to still accommodate your meeting needs given the social gathering protocols recommended by the World Health Organization, the Centers for Disease Control, or local government authority or health agencies?

With face-to-face meetings paused, can regions provide handouts, brochures, pre-recorded DVDs, etc. for region conference?

Our federation policies state an interactive component for the region conference is required. You may provide materials such as those listed above, but they do not replace the requirement of an interactive component of a region conference. The SIA Board encourages the use of audio or video conferencing, or live-streamed social media available via the internet supplemented with your Call to Conference containing key federation content being provided in all languages.

Does providing both live sessions and pre-recorded materials as part of our conference agenda meet the interactive requirements of the SIA Procedures?

Yes. Regions may provide a combination of live sessions and pre-recorded materials. SIAHQ is creating a number of items to enhance conferences this year which include pre-recorded materials such as 30 second welcomes from SIA President Penny Babb and Executive Director & CEO Elizabeth M. Lucas, a 5-minute global presentation, a 3-minute official visitor presentation as well as items that are designed to be interactive such as a Question and Answer Segment with the Official Visitor and Member Engagement Activities.

Will SIAHQ help us with providing content to use for a virtual region conference?

As first communicated to Governors and Governors-elect on September 22, 2020, SIAHQ has been developing content for regions to add to their 2021 conference agendas. This material is scheduled to be available March 22, 2021 in all our languages and will be posted on the Governors Region Conference website. Refer to attachment 2 of the September 22, 2020 communication for more detail. The resources, noted below, can be used virtually, and are designed to enhance region conferences:

- President Penny Babb’s Welcome – 30 seconds
- Executive Director & CEO Elizabeth M. Lucas’s Welcome – 30 seconds
- A Global Presentation about Supporting our 2021-2031 Big Goal – 5 minutes
- Official Visitor’s Speech – 3 minutes
- Question and Answer Segment with the Official Visitor – 30 minutes

- Region Pillar Presentations – 4 presentations totaling 40 minutes
- 2022 Convention in Seoul, South Korea PowerPoint/Video Link – 3 minutes
- Member Engagement Activities
- Dream Big Call for Video Submissions Flyer
- 100th Anniversary Celebration Flyer
- Zoom Tips

Will we have an Official Visitor for our region conference and if so, how should we prepare for her to deliver the Official Visitor speech?

Yes, each region will have an Official Visitor. Governors will be notified on January 25, 2021 of who is assigned to their region. The Official Visitor's speech is designed to be a 3-minute live presentation that may be given during an audio or video conference or live-streamed on social media. There is not an accompanying PowerPoint for this presentation so that the presenter may be seen by all participants

Can we move forward with scheduling our Fall District Meetings or other events we normally have later in the year?

It is not advisable to book any future meeting space while under a temporary pause. The SIA Board will continue to monitor the situation and communicate with regions and clubs as conditions change.

Can SIAHQ provide regions and clubs with a way to hold virtual conferences and meetings?

Currently, SIAHQ does not provide regions and clubs with virtual meeting software. We recommend referring to [Zoom's Pricing Plan](#) options and choosing the plan that works best for your region or club meeting. There is a FREE Zoom plan for meetings up to 100 attendees, with a 40-minute time limit. We suggest the Pro version, which if paid annually, can save on costs (less than \$150 USD for the year). Note, Zoom typically often offers 25-30% discount codes in a banner at the top of their [pricing page](#).

Additionally, if your club or region only needs an upgraded Zoom product for a single conference, single meeting, or short-term, Zoom Pro is available for approximately \$15 USD for a month. If you need to host more than 100 attendees, you can add the "[Large Meeting](#)" plan to your cart and choose your attendee capacity as needed. Contact [Zoom Support](#) for more information.

Please also refer to the SIA resource called "[Zoom Tips and Screenshots](#)" in all languages in the [Soroptimist Digital Toolkit](#).

What are some technical considerations when hosting a virtual conference or meeting?

First, identify the virtual platform you would like to use and ensure the platform has the necessary security to protect you from cyber intruders during your conference. A few options available depending on your specific needs and budget are:

- Zoom Meetings
- Skype
- GoToMeetings
- Microsoft Teams
- FaceBook

Then, ensure the meeting organizer has the internet bandwidth required for a strong connection. For example, Zoom uses roughly 540MB-1.62GB of data per hour for a one-on-one call, and 810MB-2.4GB per hour for group meetings. Also, you will want to obtain sufficient volunteers to support the technical management of a virtual conference. At a minimum it is recommended to have one dedicated tech support person, and another to monitor connection questions and your chat feature. These volunteers should not be part of the conference

agenda. Also, for security purposes, do not post your meeting link on social media. Instead send the link via email only.

Besides region conferences, what are the other face-to-face activities that are temporarily paused?

All face-to-face gatherings – regardless of size or venue (inside or outside) are paused. For example:

- Region Board meetings*
- Club Board meetings*
- Club meetings*
- Live Your Dream Award recipient dinners/receptions*
- Dream It, Be It programs*
- Region or Club Fundraisers*

*Note, these activities above may be accomplished virtually. See the [Sorooptimist Forward Toolkit](#) for ideas and resources. If you have specific questions about an event or how to transform your face-to-face activity, please email siahq@sorooptimist.org.

Legal Considerations

What if our region or a club in our region is having difficulty terminating our venue contract and needs legal assistance?

If needed, the Governor should consult with SIAHQ's director meetings for assistance - Linda Still, SIA Director Meetings (lindas@sorooptimist.org). If necessary, SIAHQ will consult with general counsel and provide a legal strategy. Should the region need further legal support to carry out that legal strategy, the region will need to work with their own local legal support. Our general counsel is not registered to conduct law in all US states and territories or outside the US but can make referrals to the region leadership. We have found that most venues are willing to reschedule the face to face events and projects for a future time without penalty.

What if my country or local area has mandates and guidelines allowing for face-to-face meetings?

Across the countries and territories within our federation, some mandates and guidelines may currently (or in the upcoming months) allow face-to-face activities for groups of various sizes. Venues may also allow for a certain percentage of their capacity (for example 50% of attendees of their normal capacity). The SIA Board took these into consideration and under advisement of our general counsel, it is not only the gathering type/size but the risk the organization is willing to undertake by sanctioning a meeting that is allowed by local promulgations but is not insured or whose risk for ill health of an attendee is not waived by the legal system. Therefore, the SIA Board has agreed to temporarily pause all face-to-face meeting and activities across the entire federation.

If a club has a thrift store staffed by members, should the store temporarily close during this pause on meetings – even if state/local regulations permit it to remain open? What about accepting donations for the thrift store?

Thrift store activities staffed by SIA members and open to the public, including acceptance of donations, even within current local guidelines, would pose an unreasonable risk to all involved at the present time, as well as create unnecessary, uninsured potential liability exposure for the organization and its members. The board intends to review the situation from time to time and will provide notice of any changes. Accordingly, thrift shop operations should observe the temporary pause until further notice.

Can't we use waivers or releases to limit our liability with face-to-face meetings and activities?

The board also considered whether individual waivers or releases by participants in SIA activities might provide financial protection. This would not protect the participants from possible exposure to the disease or any resulting harm to health and safety, but if effective, would shift the associated financial risk to the participants. Such agreements would be governed by the laws of the state where executed and there is no guarantee that they would be interpreted or enforced by the courts in this extraordinary situation to protect SIA. This would also require a state-by-state and case-by-case legal analysis which could become expensive for SIA, its regions and clubs without any assurance this approach would be effective.

How is SIA's U.S. general liability insurance policy affected by all of this?

Being most conservative – temporarily pausing face-to-face meetings and activities – will likely keep our US General Liability costs as is (\$6 per member). Our policy expires on April 1, 2021 and going forward, the US General Liability insurance policy will be rated on the set of restrictions we have in place for face-to-face gatherings. Being more conservative/closed puts SIA in a position to be rated as a lower risk. Given this, one area of concern is that insurers under general commercial liability policies are reported to deny claims against organizations that sanction or authorize activities which result in infection of the participants or afterward when spread to others. We also understand that when current policies are renewed in 2021, it is likely that an express exclusion of liability for COVID-related claims will be mandated. So, it is highly unlikely that SIA could shield itself against such claims through general liability insurance, thereby exposing its financial assets, already under stress as a result of the many months the disease has been present and forced curtailment of everyday and long-planned special meetings and events.

Will our U.S. general liability insurance policy cover COVID-19 related incidents?

Under the current pandemic conditions in the U.S., SIA's current club general liability insurance is not obligated to cover a COVID-19 related incident.

What are the repercussions if a region or club does not comply with SIA's temporary pause on face-to-face meetings?

All regions and clubs are required to abide by their obligations under SIA bylaws, rules and regulations, including board policy directives such as the temporary pause of face-to-face meetings and activities. designed to protect the health, safety and welfare of our members and mitigate the associated risks to persons and SIA as an organization. Failure to do so can result in appropriate sanctions as determined by the SIA board of directors. For clubs in the U.S. it will also mean further hardship as their club general liability insurance policy will become null and void because they are not following SIA rules and regulations. This could further lead to the possibility of a lawsuit filed against the U.S. club and having to absorb all the risk with the sole responsibility to defend.

Other

How long will the temporary pause on activities be in effect? When can we resume meeting face-to-face?

At this time, we are not able to predict when the conditions caused by this global pandemic will change.

Can members deliver award checks/gifts in person to our Live Your Dream Award recipients (3 or less members)?

Delivering checks/gifts in person is considered a face-to-face activity and is not possible during the temporary pause.

How do we support clubs now that meeting face-to face is temporarily paused?

Clubs should continue meeting regularly – at least once a month. [SIA Procedure B.3.a](#). Meetings and Voting states “Clubs shall hold a minimum of one general membership meeting each month except during regularly scheduled vacation periods of the clubs. Clubs may hold their meetings in any format, including face-to-face, audio or video conferencing, or social media.” With the pause on face-to-face meetings in effect, the options of audio or video conferencing, or social media are still available.

Members may be feeling a sense of instability these days due to the changes this global pandemic has brought forth to them personally, to their family, to their work life, and their volunteer endeavors. Our clubs and members will take their cue from their region and club leaders during these unprecedented times. Use these tips to set the tone, remain positive and provide encouragement:

- Guide clubs to use the [Soroptimist Forward Toolkit](#) for ideas and resources to assist in reimagining the way we work.
- Refer to [Operations and Governance in the Virtual World](#) to help ensure that all members are able to take part in the business of the club.
- Remind members how [COVID-19 has far-reaching impacts on the lives of women and girls](#) and how our vision, mission and core values are needed now more than ever.

What if some of the members in our region are not technologically savvy and/or do not like meeting virtually?

While we understand this is a concern of some members, the health and safety of all of the members in our federation comes first, so we must temporarily pause face-to-face meetings and activities. In the case of region conferences, we are several months away from our conference season. Members can use this time to become more familiar and practice using technology. Regions can also share their Calls to Conference and any other important materials as they have in the past to keep members apprised of the goings-on in the region. When members become more familiar and comfortable with technology, the skill will also help them with their virtual club meetings and activities.

As a Governor, I have planned to travel to clubs in my region in the upcoming months to do annual face-to-face visits with clubs – can I still do so?

Until the SIA Board deems the pandemic under control globally, they have directed all regions and clubs to temporarily pause all SIA related meetings, activities, and travel.

Can SIAHQ provide guidelines as to what to post on social media about this decision?

The following text can be used on social media to convey the temporary pause on face-to-face meetings and activities:

Concern for the health and safety of our members and our stakeholders has caused SIA to place a temporary pause on all SIA sanctioned face-to-face meetings, activities and related travel, including club and region meetings. This decision will be revisited periodically by the federation board of directors. For more information, please [read our FAQs](#).

How are other member-based organizations handling their face-to-face activities?

It varies and decisions are still forthcoming. For example, Rotary International’s board will make a decision at the end of January 2021. Currently, all the Rotary International region meetings are being encouraged to be virtual.