



## **Virtual Site Visit Policy Approved April 9, 2020**

With the global impact of COVID-19, the ACEN Board of Commissioners, acting under its authority per Part B, Article II, Section 2 of the Accreditation Commission for Education in Nursing, Inc. Bylaws September 2018, implemented the following emergency measures to allow for virtual site visits. This policy is effective upon passage, and shall sunset one year after approval is made, or until updated or reapproved by the ACEN Board of Commissioners at a date to be determined before then.

This policy has been implemented in keeping with the guidance provided by the United States Department of Education (USDE) on March 17, 2020, allowing temporary flexibility to use virtual site visits to help accrediting agencies serve governing organizations, nursing programs, and students through the period of COVID-19 interruption. The USDE also allowed adoption of a temporary virtual site visit policy without a public comment period.

The purpose of this policy is to:

1. Protect the health and safety of ACEN peer evaluators, students, governing organization/nursing program representatives, the public, and other stakeholders.
2. Continue advancing quality nursing education through the function of accreditation without compromise.

A virtual site visit may be scheduled by the ACEN when:

1. a manmade, natural disaster, or other public health emergency, prohibits the customary onsite evaluation
2. the health or safety of peer evaluators is in question
3. it is not feasible for the peer evaluators to reach a location
4. there are special cases as approved by the ACEN Chief Executive Officer (CEO)

The ACEN CEO reserves the right and has the authority to determine when to conduct a virtual site visit and when to conduct an in-person site visit. While the ACEN staff will seek input from the governing organization/nursing program representatives, the CEO's determination is not appealable.

The ACEN CEO reserves the right and has the authority to determine whether a delay of the initial accreditation or continuing accreditation site visit is warranted. If the CEO determines a delay of the initial accreditation or continuing accreditation site visit is warranted, then the delay shall not exceed one calendar year. While the ACEN staff will seek input from the governing organization/nursing program representatives, the CEO's determination is not appealable.

### Use of Virtual Site Visit

A virtual site visit is not the customary site visit format used by the ACEN to conduct the review of a nursing program seeking initial accreditation or continuing accreditation. When a virtual site visit is conducted by the ACEN, all or some of the peer evaluators are not physically present at the governing organization/nursing program.

A virtual site visit shall use an engaged, interactive format; it shall not rely solely on a review of documents or exchanges of emails. The rigor, quality, and process of the site visit as well as the opportunity for the governing organization/nursing program to provide evidence as well as verify, clarify, or amplify evidence must be comparable to an in-person site visit. Therefore, a virtual site visit requires the use of video or web conferencing tools, which allow real-time synchronous communication among participants and visual display of individuals, groups, documents, and/or physical spaces.

A virtual site visit will be scheduled accordingly to accommodate time zones of all ACEN peer evaluators conducting the virtual visit and the time zone of the nursing program hosting the visit, with the understanding that adjustments to schedules will be needed of all participants involved in the visit.

### Full or Partial Virtual Site Visits

In a full virtual site visit, all ACEN peer evaluators conduct their review of the governing organization/nursing program using the real-time synchronous video or web conferencing tools, which can be supplemented by telephonic conferencing tools.

In a partial virtual site visit, one or more ACEN peer evaluators conduct their review of the governing organization/nursing program using real-time synchronous video or web conferencing tools, which can be supplemented by telephonic conferencing tools, while one or more other ACEN peer evaluators conduct their review of the governing organization/nursing program in person.

### Eligibility for a Virtual Site Visit

1. All governing organizations/nursing programs seeking initial accreditation or continuing accreditation with the ACEN are eligible for a virtual site visit. Continuing accreditation includes all governing organizations/nursing programs with the current accreditation status of continuing accreditation, continuing accreditation with conditions, continuing accreditation with warning, or continuing accreditation for good cause.



2. Under the direction of the CEO, ACEN staff will review a governing organization's/nursing program's accreditation history, annual reports, and the reason for considering a virtual site visit to determine whether a governing organization/nursing program is eligible for a virtual site visit.
3. As required by the USDE, for all governing organizations/nursing programs seeking initial accreditation or continuing accreditation where 100% of the peer evaluators conducted their review virtually, the ACEN must conduct a follow-up in-person site visit to the governing organizations/nursing programs (though not necessarily a full peer-review site visit) within a reasonable period of time following the virtual site visit.

#### Evidence, Technology Infrastructure, Facilities, and Support Services

1. All virtual site visit activities shall be scheduled using the real-time synchronous virtual meeting system in use by the ACEN.
2. The governing organization/nursing program is responsible for ensuring that its technology infrastructure, facilities, and support services can accommodate a fully engaged, real-time interactive virtual site visit.
3. The governing organization/nursing program must conduct a technology test prior to the virtual site visit to demonstrate to the ACEN's satisfaction that it has adequate technology infrastructure and support services to conduct a virtual site visit that meets the ACEN's requirements, including making 100% of the program's written report, required appendices, and supporting evidence available virtually to the ACEN peer evaluators and the ACEN.
4. The governing organization/nursing program must ensure that there are adequate meeting spaces (facilities) for governing organization/nursing program representatives to meet with the ACEN peer evaluators, including simultaneous meetings as needed with individuals and groups.
5. The governing organization/nursing program must provide virtual access (e.g., through a learning management system) to written information that is comparable and sufficient to the access normally found during an in-person site visit to demonstrate compliance with the ACEN Standards and Criteria. The governing organization/nursing program must provide:
  - a. Six weeks before the visit, peer evaluators with viewer access to the program's written report, required appendices, and supporting evidence.
  - b. Any additional information the peer evaluators request before the visit.

- c. Any additional information the peer evaluators request during the visit.

See the [ACEN Guidelines for Written Reports](#) available on the ACEN website for additional information regarding virtual supporting evidence.

6. The governing organization/nursing program must provide virtual access to all interviewees (simultaneously as needed with individuals and groups) that is comparable and sufficient to the access normally found during an in-person site visit to demonstrate compliance with the ACEN Standards and Criteria.

#### ACEN Reserve Rights and Applicability to Current Policies

1. In no way does this Virtual Site Visit Policy alter the reserved rights and authority of the ACEN Board of Commissioners.
2. Unless specifically stated in this document, all ACEN policies, processes, procedures, practices, and protocols apply and remain in force.
3. All applicable initial accreditation and continuing accreditation fees, policies, processes, procedures, practices, and protocols shall be the same as for a full in-person site visit.
4. ACEN reserves the right to cancel a full or partial virtual site visit at any time prior to or during the scheduled visit and schedule a full in-person site visit instead. An in-person site visit will be scheduled within a reasonable period of time following the canceled virtual site visit.
5. If there is a technology failure that significantly impairs the peer evaluators' ability to have an engaged, real-time interactive review, then the team chair shall terminate the virtual site visit immediately, and the governing organization/nursing program cannot be visited/accredited using the virtual site visit format. An in-person site visit will be scheduled within a reasonable period of time following the terminated virtual site visit.
6. If the team chair and team members determine that the program's written report, required appendices, and supporting evidence available virtually are inadequate and the inadequacy significantly impairs their ability to conduct a review comparable to an in-person site visit, then the team chair, in consultation with ACEN staff (before or during the virtual site visit), shall terminate the virtual site visit, and the governing organization/nursing program cannot be visited/accredited using the virtual site visit format. An in-person site visit will be scheduled within a reasonable period of time following the terminated virtual site visit.



7. The governing organization/nursing program shall not record (audio or video) any portion of the virtual site visit. Based on ACEN Policy #31 Integrity, if evidence of recording is discovered, the team chair shall terminate the virtual site visit immediately, and the governing organization/nursing program cannot be visited/accredited using the virtual site visit format. Per Policy #31, if evidence of recording is discovered, it may adversely affect the governing organization's/nursing program's accreditation status with the ACEN.