



California's protection & advocacy system

VAACs: How County Elections Offices Can Start a Voting Accessibility Advisory Committee

June 2017, Pub. #5601.01

A Voting Accessibility Advisory Committee (VAAC) is a community-based committee that partners with local elections officials and meets regularly to help the elections officials develop strategies to improve voting accessibility. A VAAC advises county elections officials about issues relating to voting accessibility. A VAAC can benefit a county in many ways, including providing a forum for the disability and senior communities to voice their concerns and opportunities for collaboration and outreach.

The VAAC is a partnership, which will create dialogue between the elections office and the disability and senior community. The VAAC plays an important role in assisting the county to comply with election laws and helps provide equal access to all voters. Issues such as accessible voting systems, accessibility of polling places and ways to improve the voting experience are examples of typical areas for discussion. If you are a voter with a disability interested in VAACs please also see our related publication: ["VAAC's: How Voters with Disabilities Can Make Elections More Accessible."](#) (December 2016, Pub. #5594.01.)

Initial Steps

County elections offices should take the lead in setting up the VAAC. This is within the duties of the county elections office. However, county policies vary and election officials should consult their local rules regarding establishing advisory committees.

Are VAACs required?

For most counties in California, VAACs are optional. However, the Secretary of State's office strongly encourages all counties to form VAACs. (Please see: CCROV #10234, <http://elections.cdn.sos.ca.gov/ccrov/pdf/2014/august/14223ab.pdf>.) As discussed above, all counties should consider forming a VAAC because it will help county election officials improve accessible voting. Counties that can opt-in to the Voters Choice Act (VCA), SB 450 (2016, Allen), are mandated to form a VAAC prior to holding their first election under the VCA. The VCA requires these counties to establish a VAAC by October 1st in the year prior to the first VCA election. The first meeting must be held by April 1st of the election year.

Importantly, VCA counties should strongly consider having a VAAC up and running well before the deadlines in the law. If a county waited until April 1st of the election year to hold the first VAAC meeting it would not allow the county to be able to use the VAAC to help create the required draft plan for the vote center model election. The VAAC is an important tool to assist elections officials with meeting the numerous VCA requirements for protecting voters with disabilities. For example, the VAAC can help elections officials select vote center and ballot drop off locations. Community members on the VAAC can help plan the required outreach events and assess whether the media plan will effectively reach voters with disabilities.

Stand-alone VAAC or combine with LAAC

County election offices need to decide if the VAAC will be combined with a Language Accessibility Advisory Committee (LAAC). A LAAC is a community-based committee that meets with elections officials about language access issues. The VCA allows counties with less than fifty thousand registered voters to have a combined VAAC and LAAC. However, there are advantages to having separate committees. For example, an independent VAAC will provide county elections officials with greater access to the disability community, which will improve compliance with state and federal law. In a combined VAAC/LAAC, it can be difficult to have a single meeting long enough to adequately cover both disability and language access issues.

Recruiting members

For VAACs to be successful, it is critical to have community participation. It is important to reach out directly to the disability community about the opportunity to join the VAAC. Just posting meeting times online is not enough. Community members will likely be excited to be a part of the VAAC, but it will take outreach to explain the VAAC's role and purpose. Let people who work with voters with disabilities know they can be on a VAAC without being an elections expert or having disabilities.

There should be a multiplatform media effort to reach community members about the VAAC. The VAAC should be advertised on the county and election websites. Post flyers and posters explaining the VAAC and how to join. Below we have listed some suggested community based organizations. Other agencies that primarily serve people with disabilities can be found by checking the list of agencies in your county required to provide data on their voter registration efforts. The Secretary of State has the [data](#) posted online on their website (<http://www.sos.ca.gov/elections/voter-registration/nvra/reports/>). Some agencies, like Regional Centers, might already have staff and client advocates focused on voting issues, who would make wonderful VAAC members. Please contact other counties to find best practices for member recruitment. It can be helpful to contact neighboring counties in order to find members because many organizations that serve people with disabilities are located across county lines. Additionally, please contact the Voting Rights Unit at DRC for assistance with identifying resources and community members.

Contact community based organizations:

- Contacting community-based organizations directly is a good first step.
- Organizations such as:
 - [California Council of the Blind](http://www.acb.org/affiliate-california) (<http://www.acb.org/affiliate-california>)
 - Veterans Services offices (www.va.gov)
 - College/university disability services offices
 - [Independent Living Centers](#) (see <http://www.rehab.cahwnet.gov/ils/ILC-List.html> the independent living center in your county)
 - [Local Regional Centers](http://www.dds.ca.gov/RC/RCLookup.cfm) (<http://www.dds.ca.gov/RC/RCLookup.cfm>)

- Organizations serving persons with specific disabilities, such as local Deaf community groups and local chapters of United Cerebral Palsy (see <http://ucp.org/findaffiliate/>) or the Multiple Sclerosis Society (see <http://www.nationalmssociety.org/Chapters?chapters=6513,6514,6555>) are good organizations from which to solicit membership
- Senior Centers
- [Disability Rights California](http://www.disabilityrightscalifornia.org) (<http://www.disabilityrightscalifornia.org/pubs/PublicationsVoting.htm>)

Educate and recruit county elections staff

Ensure that all county elections staff know about and understand the VAAC. Send out an office wide email letting them know the VAAC is recruiting members. Encourage county elections staff to invite community members to join the VAAC. They can be a great resource for finding people to join.

It is also important to find the right people from the county elections office to join the VAAC. Like community members, there is no requirement for staff to have a disability. Although this last point might seem obvious, it can be helpful during outreach to staff. Additionally, there are no set rules for who should be on the VAAC in large part because the staff sizes of county elections offices vary so widely in California. People with the following job titles or responsibilities should be on the VAAC:

- Executive management (e.g., the Registrar, Assistant Registrar, etc.)
- Head poll worker trainer
- Elections equipment supervisor
- Polling site inspector
- Community outreach staff
- Media communications staff

Leadership structure

We suggest each county VAAC have two co-chairs, one from the elections staff and one from the community. The co-chairs should create and distribute an agenda incorporating county needs and community members' concerns. Co-chairs should be elected by the committee and have a finite term. At the end of a co-chair's term, other members should be encouraged to apply to become a co-chair.

A county elections office staff member should be the coordinator for the VAAC. This person can answer questions via email, arrange meeting logistics, and draft the agenda.

Agenda and suggested topics for meetings

The agenda should have time for new business, specific items and old business. Include an agenda item to plan the date, time and location for the next VAAC meeting. An agenda should be distributed as widely as possible at least 24 hours prior to the meeting. All elections office staff should be made aware of the next scheduled VAAC meeting via email or an online calendar.

Allow members to submit questions via email if they cannot attend a meeting. The questions should be read aloud and discussed during the meeting.

The VAAC should have its own page on the county elections website. The page link should feature prominently on the voters with disabilities information page. The webpage is a place to post agendas and meeting notes.

Meetings should be held at least quarterly. Suggested months for meetings are: March, June, September, and December. The exact dates are flexible but try to avoid highly stressful times close to elections. Making the timing of meetings consistent and regular allows community members to work the VAAC into their schedules.

The VAAC can perform many functions and the following are typical subjects for agenda items:

- Assist in the development of educational videos.
- Advise on the accessibility of polling places.
 - Review election plans for selecting and surveying physical accessibility of polling locations.
 - Have the polling site Americans with Disabilities Act inspector present to the VAAC post-election on reported physical accessibility issues.
- Participate in the training of poll-workers.
 - Review training materials for accessible voting systems.
 - Review voters with disabilities poll worker training.

- Suggest the allocation of county HAVA funds such as:
 - Purchase of cones for parking.
 - Purchase of bells for curbside voting.
- Provide accessibility feedback on the county elections' website.
- Help select polling place locations.
- Discuss new or pending legislation affecting voters with disabilities.
- Advise on recruiting poll workers with disabilities.
- Suggest possible community outreach.
- Advise on media strategy.

VAACs in a VCA county

The VCA requires counties that opt in to form a VAAC and has specific requirements for engaging the disability community. The VAAC meetings will need to be adjusted to incorporate these requirements. Please note that many of the following items are appropriate for VAACs in counties using traditional elections.

- Review required accessibility of website information that must be posted for voters.
- Review "remote accessible vote by mail" (RAVBM) technology.
- Determine if the elections office is prepared to provide election materials in accessible formats if requested by voters.
- Help plan the required public meeting for members of the disability community.
- Help plan required voter education workshop for voters with disabilities.
- Assess vote center locations and the needs of voters with disabilities.
- Assess ballot drop off locations and the needs of voters with disabilities.
- Comment on the voter education and outreach plan.
- Identify areas needing mobile vote centers.

Planning accessible meetings

Election officials must take steps to make meetings accessible for all participants. Accessibility is more than physical accessibility of a building. The following link is a great resource for setting up accessible meetings.

<http://www.adahospitality.org/accessible-meetings-events-conferences-guide>

VAAC meetings can be held at the county elections office. Seek input from VAAC members about alternate meeting locations. Offsite meetings can improve attendance and may be easier for members who use public transportation. Make sure there is a way to attend the meeting remotely. The option to attend via phone, skype or teleconference is a great way to increase participation and accessibility. Light snacks and drinks can help improve attendance and make meetings more comfortable. However, as discussed in the above referenced guide, be sensitive to strong scents and common food allergies.

Conclusion

All counties are strongly encouraged to create a VAAC because it is an important tool to improve voting accessibility. County elections officials with questions about VAACs are encouraged to contact the Voting Rights Unit at DRC. Staff in our Voting Rights Unit actively participate in a number of VAACs statewide. Additionally, please invite DRC to attend your VAAC. While DRC involvement is not a substitute for community members we appreciate the opportunity to join the discussion and provide guidance.

[We want to hear from you! Please complete the following survey about our publications and let us know how we are doing!](https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1d6ezTI2M5UMAWU66exLbc1SQ9wDPzvtuS3AGR4-cgwE/viewform?c=0&w=1)

<https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1d6ezTI2M5UMAWU66exLbc1SQ9wDPzvtuS3AGR4-cgwE/viewform?c=0&w=1>

For legal assistance call 800-776-5746 or complete a [request for assistance form](#). For all other purposes call 916-504-5800 (Northern CA); 213-213-8000 (Southern CA).

Disability Rights California is funded by a variety of sources, for a complete list of funders, go to <http://www.disabilityrightscalifornia.org/Documents/ListofGrantsAndContracts.html>.