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## Public Participation in the Voter's Choice Act: How to Run a Great Meeting

Most election officials have extensive experience conducting public outreach and making community presentations. With this suggestions below, Voter's Choice California (VCC) aims to reaffirm officials' existing practices within the context of the California Voter's Choice Act (VCA) and suggest new practices that might increase opportunities for individuals and groups to provide meaningful input at public meetings. The document first explores planning for a public meeting about the VCA then suggests methods for effective facilitation. It is excerpted from [Public Participation: A Guide for Election Officials Implementing the Voter's Choice Act](#).

### Planning a public meeting

To maximize effective community participation in public meetings, we recommend the following practices:

- **Timing:** Schedule public meetings for the evening and for at least a two-hour period to ensure community members can attend after work. Weekend meetings should also be considered.
- **Location:** The locations should be easy to access by public transportation and provide ample parking. The meetings should take place at a central location in the county or in multiple locations around the county, allowing for geographic inclusion. You can encourage more diverse participation by holding meetings in underrepresented neighborhoods, particularly at sites familiar to one or more targeted constituencies.

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Future of California Elections 1000 North Alameda Street, Suite 240, Los Angeles, CA 90012  
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- **Accessibility:** Meeting locations should meet all accessibility requirements. Meeting notices should make the public aware that interpreters and disability-related accommodations, such as American Sign Language (ASL) interpreters, will be available upon request. Translations of materials that will be discussed at the meeting must also be provided in covered languages and alternative formats (such as large print, CD, MP3, and electronically).
- **Comfort:** Make sure participants have access to water and bathrooms. If possible, consider providing snacks, especially if the meeting is at dinner time. If the county does not have resources available, consider inviting a community partner to provide snacks. Also consider providing or asking a community partner to provide child care.
- **Remote participation:** If possible, consider providing more than one way for community members to participate. For example, explore the idea of using a video-conferencing tool like Skype or conference call line for those that cannot attend in-person. Other options include encouraging participation via social media or by submitting questions and ideas in advance. See section four of this guide for additional suggestions.
- **Social media:** Twitter and other forms of social media can be used to engage those unable to attend the meeting as well as those in the room. A robust social media plan includes communication before, during, and after the meeting. Consider creating a Twitter hashtag that will allow people to follow the conversation and submit questions in real-time. Advertise the hashtag during the meeting and encourage participants to use it to engage and educate their communities. Be sure to follow up and answer any questions posed via social media. For additional social media tips, please see section three of this guide.

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## Meeting facilitation

A well-planned and facilitated meeting can elevate the effectiveness and volume of feedback the public provides, increasing the likelihood that public input will strengthen an EAP. If possible, we recommend enlisting a staff member or third-party facilitation expert to guide the conversation, perhaps after an introduction from the election official. The facilitator's sole job is to make the meeting run smoothly and ensure people are heard. Among other benefits, enlisting a facilitator can:

- Free county representatives to participate in the conversation and actively listen to input.
- Bring a layperson's perspective and utilize plain language when describing the new system.
- Encourage open communication and make members of the public feel more comfortable making recommendations.
- Facilitate a free flow of information while maintaining focus on productive conversations.
- Enhance the election official's ability to respond to challenging questions or negative feedback if they arise.

Regardless of who facilitates the meeting, the facilitator must remain neutral to all points of view shared in the meeting.

The following practices will help you generate robust public participation, diverse perspectives, and useful feedback at community meetings.

- **Agenda setting and facilitation:** Thoughtful agenda planning is key to soliciting meaningful feedback. Before the meeting, be sure to prepare and disseminate a clear agenda that helps community members understand the questions you will ask during the meeting and the types of feedback that would be most helpful for them to provide. Identify specific goals you want to achieve in the meeting. Articulate those in advance and during the meeting, and work toward achieving them before adjournment. Also articulate the ground rules for constructive participation and

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return to them if needed during the meeting. All decision-making meetings should be open to the public and, to the extent possible, scheduled at a time and location convenient and accessible to the public.

- **Share information:** In addition to soliciting input from the public, these meetings provide opportunities for you to communicate your approach to interested parties. Consider sharing your own goals, decision-making process and criteria, constraints, and other key factors in your implementation effort. This may set the stage for more constructive feedback and reduce potential community concerns after decisions have been made.
- **Flexible questions:** It might be challenging for voters not experienced in election administration to jump right into suggesting specific voting locations or volunteer ways they can help with VCA implementation. Consider exercises and questions you can ask to facilitate effective input. The following questions are structured to help generate useful responses:
  - What do you like about the way you vote currently? What difficulties do you experience with voting?
  - How do you feel about the new system? What do you like or not like?
  - How do you want to feel when you are voting?
  - Which of the three methods of voting do you think you will use? When you consider yourself voting in that way, do you envision any complications or challenges?
  - What time of day is ideal for voting? What would make you feel good about your experience at a vote center? What might create a negative experience for you?
  - How does your community access information about elections and voting? (e.g., specific media outlets, specific places like worship services)

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- Where do you go to get information about community events? Online? Facebook? A local paper?
  - Whose advice do you listen to? How about others in your community?
  - Where do you go on a weekly or daily basis that might be a convenient place to drop your ballot? (e.g., kids' school, specific grocery store)
  - Are there spaces in your neighborhood that are used for public meetings or where people feel most comfortable attending meetings?
  - Are there places where you or members of your community might feel uncomfortable going to a meeting?
  - Do the materials describing the VCA make sense to you? What is confusing about the materials? What changes would you recommend?
  - Don't be afraid to ask follow-up questions to better understand a participant's response.
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- **Soliciting active participation:** Remember, this is a great opportunity to get input on vote center placement, feedback on your outreach and education materials, suggestions for public meeting times and locations, and ideas for creative and expanded outreach to voters. It's also a chance to learn how you can address any challenges voters might perceive or face with a new election system. Provide opportunities in the meeting for participants to lead meeting discussion and/or activities. For example, small group discussions ensure everyone has a chance to speak and provide feedback while giving meeting participants the opportunity to take a more prominent role. Another good way to capture ideas from every individual at a meeting is to ask each participant to complete a survey. Consider using technological platforms to better collaborate with meeting participants. These might visualize common themes such as with word clouds or identify preferences such as through instant polling.
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- **Accessibility for voters with disabilities:** Be mindful to serve the needs of all your community members, including those with disabilities. [This detailed guide](#) provides

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comprehensive recommendations for making every element of your meeting accessible.

- **Language accessibility:** Making the meeting more accessible to various language communities will ensure that participants understand the details of the new system, can generate the most effective input for your county, and will more likely result in participants engaging and educating their communities after the meeting. Consider facilitating the meeting in the language spoken by the community the meeting is targeting. If the meeting will be held in English, you can provide interpretation services upon request in all the languages needed or covered under state and federal law. Ensure that all of your meeting materials are translated.
- **Materials:** Make sure you have sufficient copies of all meeting documents to share with participants, including copies of the agenda, exercises, any draft or sample outreach materials, and presentation slides. It would also be helpful to include basic information about the Voter's Choice Act, such as the Secretary of State and VCC's [fact sheet](#). As noted above, these should be made available in all of the languages targeted for the specific meeting.
- **Follow up:** Reaching out to participants after your meeting is critical as it confirms that you've heard their input and lays the groundwork for their ongoing assistance during the public education phase. After a meeting, email participants with a summary of what you heard during the meeting and any related actions you plan to take. Let participants know how they can access the next draft of the EAP or learn about other decisions you plan to make. Thank them for their participation and offer suggestions for how they can stay engaged and educate their communities about the changes ahead.

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