

Voter's Choice Act Research Brief Series

Best Practices: Developing an Election Administration Plan

This best practices summary is a companion to the research brief California Voter's Choice Act Implementation Process: Election Administration Plan and Vote Center Siting, based on an extensive study of the five counties that adopted the Voter's Choice Act in 2018.



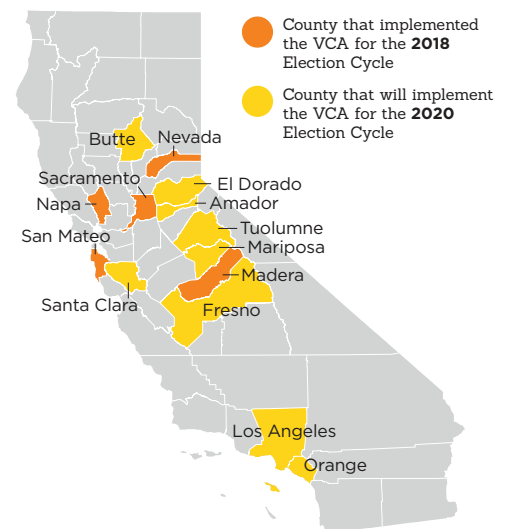
County VCA Planning Requires Community Input

When California counties adopt the Voter's Choice Act (VCA), they begin an implementation process that requires dialogue with the public. County elections offices must listen to community input during the planning process to ensure broad accessibility of voting and voter resources. They must also communicate with voters to inform them about the new model. Specifically, the law states that VCA counties must establish a county election administration plan, or EAP. The EAP details how the county intends to meet all requirements of the VCA, including how the elections office will engage the public and conduct outreach. The county must develop the plan itself in consultation with the public, as specified by the VCA.

California Voter's Choice Act Requirements on Community Consultation

- VCA county officials must draft an election administration plan (EAP) in consultation with the public, with a Language Accessibility Advisory Committee (LAAC) and a Voting Accessibility Advisory Committee (VAAC).
- The LAAC and VAAC must be established by October 1 prior to an election year and hold their first meeting by April 1 of the election year. County officials are encouraged to gather and make use of input from the LAAC and VAAC prior to the public consultation period for the EAP.
- County officials must give public notice and accept public comment for at least 14 days prior to a public hearing on the draft EAP.
- Upon adopting the final EAP, county officials must submit the EAP's voter education and outreach plan to the California Secretary of State, who shall "approve, approve with modifications, or reject" the voter education and outreach plan.
- The county must post the draft plan, amended plan, and adopted final EAP on its website, with language translations and in a format accessible for people with disabilities.

Participating Counties



About the Voter's Choice Act

The Voter's Choice Act (VCA) provides California counties the choice of adopting a new voting model that includes replacing neighborhood polling places with vote centers and mailing Vote-By-Mail ballots to all registered voters. New vote centers will offer a variety of services including in-person voting, accessible voting options, language assistance, mail ballot drop-off and conditional voter registration. They will be distributed throughout the county and available to all voters up to ten days before Election Day. Five counties adopted the VCA model for the 2018 election cycle, and an additional nine counties will adopt it for the 2020 election cycle, in total comprising approximately half of the state's current registered voter population.

Best Practices for Developing a Community-Informed Election Administration Plan

These recommendations for county elections offices are intended to facilitate meaningful engagement of community stakeholders and successful EAP development. They are drawn from the experiences of county VCA election officials and community advocates interviewed as part of the study.

- **Prepare county staff for community-facing work.** Existing VCA counties report that working with community groups to develop the EAP requires substantial time and effort on the part of county staff. Counties committed to implementing the VCA should plan to dedicate ample staff time and resources to creating the EAP with the help of community input. Due to the essential role that the public plays in VCA planning and implementation, counties should consider hiring staff with strong community-based experience and providing skills training to staff in community engagement.
- **Invest in community partnerships.** Because community groups serve as an important connection to voters' needs regarding access, election officials must solicit their feedback prior to drafting the EAP. Yet community involvement in VCA planning and implementation calls for sustained partnership, rather than a one-time request. By reaching out to community groups at the outset of planning, VCA counties can provide information and time for stakeholders to understand how the VCA may affect their constituents. Furthermore, by demonstrating their interest in public involvement, county elections offices will facilitate community participation in opportunities for open dialogue to raise questions and discuss ideas. In addition to strengthening the EAP, cultivating productive partnerships at this stage can lead to further benefits, such as assistance with voter education and identifying locations for vote centers and drop boxes.
- **Share a community engagement plan and timeline.** The VCA sets implementation deadlines for county elections offices that can be challenging when scheduling decision making and seeking community input. To balance the need for community participation with the need to meet VCA deadlines, election officials and community advocates recommend mapping out a clear timeline for input and decision points, building in feedback opportunities far in advance of statutory deadlines to avoid a hurried process and ineffective community collaboration. Sharing the timeline with community groups at the start of VCA planning can help establish a common understanding of the planning process and serve as a tool to encourage timely communications among all partners.
- **Actively solicit broad community involvement.** County election officials can achieve more meaningful community input by engaging a wide variety of stakeholders. Increasing the number and type of organizations involved in EAP development, particularly from underrepresented communities, will increase the likelihood that the VCA will meet the needs of all voters in the county. Election officials and advocates in existing VCA counties advise reaching out early and establishing on-going relationships with a representative set of public stakeholders, and community groups serving voters with disabilities and voters requiring language assistance, among others.

“Community engagement requires a specific skill set that [election officials] either have to develop internally or start hiring to increase staff capacity for community engagement.”

– VCA county election official

“Election administrators have very strict and unforgiving statutory deadlines. Most stakeholder groups don't operate in that type of environment.”

– VCA county election official