

County Voting Accessibility Advisory Committee Toolkit

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Created by the California Secretary of State's
Voting Accessibility Advisory Committee (VAAC)

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION	1
WHAT A VAAC CAN DO	3
Feedback.....	3
Collaboration	3
Outreach	3
CREATING A VAAC	4
PLANNING FOR SUCCESSFUL MEETINGS	6
SAMPLE MEETING AGENDA	<i>Error! Bookmark not defined.</i>
MAINTAINING MEMBERSHIP	8
MORE INFORMATION	10
CONTACTS AND LINKS FOR MORE ASSISTANCE	11
Disability Rights California – Local VAAC Guide.....	11
State VAAC	11
Contact: Voter Access Coordinator:	11
2022-2024 State VAAC Members.....	11
Independent Living Centers.....	12
State and National Disability Agencies	13
Americans with Disabilities Act, United State Department of Justice Civil Rights Division.....	13
Disability Rights California	13
The California Council of the Blind	13
National Council on Disability, an independent U.S. government agency	13
National Federation of the Blind.....	13
American Council of the Blind	13
American Foundation for the Blind	13
National Association of the Deaf (NAD).....	13
Hearing Loss Association of America.....	13
Youth Organizing! Disabled and Proud	13
State Council on Developmental Disabilities, Area Boards on Developmental Disabilities	13
www.scdd.ca.gov	13
Easter Seals	13
The Arc.....	14
Learning Disabilities Association of America.....	14

INTRODUCTION

This guide is designed to share ideas and best practices for creating and maintaining a voting accessibility advisory committee (VAAC) at the city, county, or regional level.

While the Secretary of State is the chief elections officer for California, county elections officials are responsible for conducting elections. County officials are responsible for providing ballots and important election information to voters, ensuring polling places are accessible, and providing voting systems that allow for independent and private voting.

Many laws and standards are designed to ensure polling places are accessible to people with disabilities.

- The federal Voting Accessibility for the Elderly and Handicapped Act requires polling place access for senior voters and voters with disabilities.
- California Elections Code section 12280 states, “When designating polling places, the elections official shall undertake necessary measures in the locating of polling places to ensure that polling places meet the guidelines promulgated by the Secretary of State for accessibility by the physically handicapped.”
- The federal Help America Vote Act (HAVA) requires accessible, independent, and private voting for all eligible voters by ensuring 1) equal access to polling places that are accessible to all, and 2) voting systems that allow for independent and private voting.

To provide guidance in interpreting federal and state requirements for accessible polling places, the Secretary of State contracted with the California Department of Rehabilitation (DOR) to update the Polling Place Accessibility Guidelines and the Polling Place Accessibility Checklist at www.sos.ca.gov/elections/publications-and-resources/polling-place-accessibility-guidelines. The Secretary of State also coordinates with DOR to provide training on surveying polling places for accessibility.

In 2005, the Secretary of State established the state VAAC to advise, assist, and provide recommendations on how best to implement federal and state laws regarding access to the electoral process for voters with disabilities. Through the years, the state VAAC has provided input on many voting-related projects and issues, including the Polling Place

County VAAC Toolkit

Accessibility Guidelines, checklist, and training video; voting system accessibility, a confidential voter accessibility survey, and the online voter registration application system.

The Secretary of State recommends that each county elections official establish a local VAAC to address voting accessibility needs. The county elections official in a county that is transitioning to the Voter's Choice Act (VCA) is required to establish a VAAC. The VAAC will offer input/feedback to the Elections staff during the planning stages to ensure greater accessibility for voters with disabilities throughout the entire VCA implementation process. VAAC members will also participate with the County's education and outreach efforts, particularly to the disability community.

WHAT A VAAC CAN DO

A local VAAC can benefit your county in many ways, including providing a forum for the disability and senior communities in your county to voice their concerns and provide advice and opportunities for collaboration and outreach within your community.

Feedback

A local VAAC provides a forum for those who represent the disability and senior communities to discuss issues they encounter in the voting process. VAAC members can recommend accessibility improvements to polling place websites, voter materials, and county election procedures. Local VAAC members can also provide feedback on polling locations, voting systems, and other accessible matters like voter outreach and Americans with Disabilities Act compliance.

Collaboration

A local VAAC opens lines of communication and fosters cooperation with community groups, ensuring elections officials can address issues directly and minimize misunderstandings. A local VAAC is also a great resource for recruiting poll workers.

Outreach

A local VAAC provides outreach to individuals and organizations that promote awareness of individuals with disabilities and seniors. Reaching out to these people and organizations can provide opportunities for the county to work with the community as a whole to understand the diverse array of challenges these communities face, as well as recruiting potential poll workers or VAAC members.



CREATING A VAAC

The Secretary of State recommends that each county elections official establish a local VAAC to help address voting accessibility needs. If a local VAAC within one county is not practical, counties may consider forming a regional VAAC to pool resources and ideas. Another option would be to establish regional VAACs encompassing the five areas of the state established by the California Association of Clerks and Election Officials (CACEO): Bay Area, Central Area, Motherlode Area, Northern Area, and Southern Area.

The first step to creating any committee is determining the number of members needed. The Secretary of State recommends for counties with:

Number of Registered Voters	Recommended Number of Members
Less than 50,000 registered voters	Minimum of three members
Between 50,000 and 500,000 registered voters	Minimum of five members
Between 500,000 and 1,000,000 registered voters	Minimum of seven members
More than 1,000,000 registered voters	Minimum of nine members

When appropriate, existing county boards or committees, which focus on accessibility matters and meet the representational guidelines above, could assume the functions of a local VAAC.

Participation and varied experience are essential to a successful VAAC. Representatives from the disability community as well as people with a background in accessibility issues often contribute ideas from first-hand knowledge of challenges for some voters. People of differing backgrounds, ages, and who speak different languages that are representative of the disability community within their county as a whole may also contribute to the VAAC. People from county government have an in-depth understanding of elections processes and laws. County elections officials are encouraged to reach out to their local disability agencies and independent living centers to recruit VAAC members with differing disabilities, including cognitive, mental health, and sensory.

The San Francisco County Department of Elections found an effective way to recruit members for its VAAC by contacting local disability agencies to discuss the functions of their county's VAAC. The county's outreach efforts were so effective that VAAC membership increased from four members in 2016 to 20 members in 2017.

County VAAC Toolkit

Santa Cruz county's VAAC is led by its County Clerk and internal staff. It includes a program coordinator for polling places, precinct operations, accessibility and voting equipment, and a program coordinator for election officers/training and voter registration/outreach. In the past the Assistant County Clerk participated on the committee. Santa Cruz county elections staff members contacted their local independent living center in order to find VAAC members. They have had members from the County Commission on Disabilities, local service providers, Disability Rights California, and other local disability commissions, as well as a blind voter who used the county audio voting unit, a webmaster from a site for people with disabilities, and a former member of the County Planning Department.

PLANNING FOR SUCCESSFUL MEETINGS

Soon after establishing a local VAAC, the county elections official should schedule the first meeting. The frequency of meetings depends on the needs of the county and availability of members. A VAAC may choose to meet on a monthly basis, however a VAAC may also chose to meet less frequently. For example, the state VAAC meets approximately six times per year. To bolster participation, it is important to establish alternatives to attending the meetings in person. Examples of an alternative method for participation are holding the meeting via a conference call or web conference.

Create an Agenda. An agenda is essential to every VAAC meeting. The agenda helps to ensure a meeting stays on topic and can cover an array of subject matters. Distribute the agenda prior to the meeting day.

Establish a chairperson or co-chairs. At the first local VAAC meeting, nominate a chairperson or co-chairs who will lead the meetings. Establish operating procedures such as how often the VAAC should meet, a reliable and accessible meeting location, and a standard meeting time and length.

Create a VAAC mission statement. The state’s VAAC mission statement is to

“advise, assist, and provide recommendations to the Secretary of State’s Office regarding the implementation of federal and state laws relating to access to the electoral process by voters with disabilities, so that all persons can vote independently and privately.”

Establish goals. VAAC goals may include:

- Assisting and advising county elections officials on existing programs to reach people with disabilities, and also provide advice on whether to create new programs.
- Advising county elections officials on where to set up voting equipment and how to recognize barriers to participation for senior voters and voters with disabilities.
- Assisting county elections officials in surveying polling places for compliance with state and federal accessibility guidelines. Evaluating an inaccessible polling place or voting area to determine if – with the use of temporary modifying equipment or measures – it can be modified to permit use by senior voters and voters with disabilities.

County VAAC Toolkit

- Assisting and advising county elections officials in training poll workers to assist senior voters and voters with disabilities.
- Assisting in the recruitment of poll workers or precinct officials who are seniors or have a disability.
- Assisting county elections officials to enhance website accessibility, including establishing a county website accessibility statement.

County elections officials may also wish to create a polling place accessibility plan with the help of their local VAAC. Polling place accessibility plans serve as a guide to establishing polling places in the county that meet accessibility requirements. Santa Cruz county, for example, received valuable input after asking its local VAAC to review a draft polling place plan and included the VAAC mission statement in the final plan, which is available on the [CACEO's](#) website.

January 25th, 2023



**LOS ANGELES COUNTY
REGISTRAR-RECORDER/COUNTY CLERK**

DEAN C. LOGAN
Registrar-Recorder/County Clerk



Figure 1 Los Angeles County Registrar Recorder/County Clerk Icon

VAAC Meeting Agenda

3:00pm – 4:30pm

- I. Welcome/Introductions**
- II. Approval of 10/12/2022 Meeting Minutes**
- III. Open Discussion**
- IV. November 8th, 2022 General Election Recap**
 - Vote Center Accessibility
 - BMD Related Issues for Voters with Disabilities
- V. 2023 Scheduled Elections**
- VI. Election Legislation Updates**
- VII. DRC Survey Feedback**
- VIII. Next Meeting**

MAINTAINING MEMBERSHIP

Once a local VAAC is established, maintaining active membership may be one of the most challenging issues. It is important for the county elections staff to communicate to VAAC members how their continued participation benefits the election process. Options for sustaining an active VAAC membership include:

- Implementing attendance requirements, such as requiring members to attend a specified percentage of meetings each year.
- Requesting regular feedback from members, perhaps including a confidential annual satisfaction survey.
- Continuing advertisement for new membership after the VAAC has been formed in order to find new replacements quickly.
- Diversifying the agenda topics so people of different backgrounds and expertise remain interested. While some VAAC members may be especially interested in voting systems, others may be more focused on polling place

accessibility or voter outreach. Encouraging diversity in membership will also contribute to diverse agenda topics. For example, people who use wheelchairs may have different voting experiences than people who can walk but cannot see ballots and polling place signs. Prospective members may be staff or volunteers of local disability organizations. Such organizations may include Independent Living Centers (ILC), Aging and Disabled Resource Connection (ADRC), Family Empowerment Centers, or other local boards or organizations.

- Engaging VAAC members in community outreach. Encourage VAAC members to promote the opportunities for access they helped create. This will allow the VAAC to have a sense of ownership and increase their desire to be a positive part of creating solutions for voter accessibility in your county.

MORE INFORMATION

Forming a VAAC in your county or region may help strengthen your county's attention to voting accessibility matters along with fostering a more cooperative relationship with the local disability community.

The Secretary of State encourages each county elections official to connect with officials in other counties and states to share best practices on how to form and sustain an active VAAC.

For more information about VAACs and polling place accessibility requirements, visit the Secretary of State's website at the [California Secretary of State Elections and Resources](#).

To share accomplishments and best practices for an updated version of this guide, contact the [Secretary of State's Voter Access Coordinator](#).

CONTACTS AND LINKS FOR MORE ASSISTANCE

Disability Rights California - Local VAAC Guide

[VAACs: How County Elections Offices Can Start a Voting Accessibility Advisory Committee](#)

State VAAC

Contact: Voter Access Coordinator:

VAAC@sos.ca.gov

Ryan Reese

Website:

www.sos.ca.gov/elections/vaac

2022-2024 State VAAC Members

- **Veronica Elsea, Co-Chair**
Member, Santa Cruz VAAC
- **Fred Nisen, Co-chair**
Managing Attorney Disability Rights California
- **Maria D. Coronel,**
Assessors Outreach Specialist
Yolo County
- **Dianne Russell**
Disability Access Consultant (Retired)
Department of Rehabilitation
- **Janet L. Bell**
Walnut Creek, CA
- **Mary Helen Gallegos**
Monterey County Elections
- **Larry D. Smith**
Supervisor Riverside County
Registrar of Voters
- **Courtney Bailey-Kanelos**
Registrar of Voters
Sacramento County Elections
- **Lindsie Verma**
Redwood City, CA

Independent Living Centers

An independent living center is a consumer controlled, community based, cross disability, nonresidential private nonprofit agency that is designed and operated within a local community by individuals with disabilities.

- [California Foundation for Independent Living Centers](#)
- California Department of Rehabilitation [list for all independent living centers in the state:](#)

State and National Disability Agencies

Americans with Disabilities Act, United State Department of Justice Civil Rights Division

(800) 514-0301 / TTY (800) 514-0383
www.ada.gov

Disability Rights California

(800) 776-5746 / TTY (800) 719-5798
www.disabilityrightsca.org

The California Council of the Blind

1303 J Street, Suite 400, Sacramento, CA
95814-2900
(800) 221-6359 / Outside CA (916) 441-2100
www.ccbnet.org

National Council on Disability, an independent U.S. government agency

1331 F Street, NW, Suite 850, Washington,
DC 20004
(202) 272-2004 / TTY (202) 272-2074
ncd@ncd.gov
www.ncd.gov

National Federation of the Blind

200 East Wells Street, Baltimore, MD 21230
(410) 659-9314
www.nfb.org/contact-us

American Council of the Blind

2200 Wilson Boulevard, Suite 650
Arlington, VA 22201-3354
(202) 467-5081 / (800) 424-8666
info@acb.org
www.acb.org/node/6

American Foundation for the Blind

2 Penn Plaza, Suite 1102, New York, NY 10121
(212) 502-7600
www.afb.org/default.aspx

National Association of the Deaf (NAD)

8630 Fenton Street, Suite 820, Silver Spring,
MD 20910
(301) 587-1788 / (301) 328-1443 / TTY (301) 587-
1789
www.nad.org

Hearing Loss Association of America

7910 Woodmont Ave, Suite 1200, Bethesda,
MD 20814
(301) 657-2248
[www.hearingloss.org/content/hlaa-chapters-
and-state-organizations](http://www.hearingloss.org/content/hlaa-chapters-and-state-organizations)

Youth Organizing! Disabled and Proud

1234 H Street, Suite 100, Sacramento, CA
95814
(866) 296-9753 / TDD (800) 900-0706
www.yodisabledproud.org

State Council on Developmental Disabilities, Area Boards on Developmental Disabilities

www.scdd.ca.gov

Easter Seals

233 South Wacker Drive, Suite 2400, Chicago,
IL 60606
(800) 221-6827
www.easterseals.com

The Arc

1825 K Street, NW, Suite 1200, Washington,
DC 20006

(800) 433-5255

www.thearc.org

Learning Disabilities Association of America

4156 Library Road, Pittsburgh, PA 15234-
1349

(412) 341-1515

www.ldaamerica.org