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Voting Accessibility Advisory Committee (VAAC)

Wednesday, February 15, 2023, 1:30 p.m.

Meeting Minutes

1. Welcome, Call to Order, Roll Call, and Declaration of Quorum

VAAC members present:

- Fred Nisen
- Jan Bell
- Dianne Russell
- Maria Coronel
- Veronica Elsea

Members of SOS

- Debra Ledsinger - OVSTA
- Adam Quintana - VCA
- Steven Carda - Elections
- Liz Hall – Safe at Home
- Erric Garris – Legislative Unit

Members of the public:

- Sarah Harris
- Brittany Stonesifer – ACLU Northern CA
- Regina

Quorum was met.

2. VAAC Members Community Outreach Updates

- Jan Bell had no updates.
- Dianne Russell had no updates.
- Maria Coronel said that Yolo County Elections is working on outreach efforts in preparation for their May 2nd special election. They have also scheduled a high school voter registration drive over the last two weeks in April. Maria Coronel also commented that they are accepting new applications to join both the Yolo County VAAC and Language Access

Advisory Committee (LAAC). Their VAAC meets the third Wednesday of the month at 5:30 p.m. and the LAAC meets the third Thursday of the month, also at 5:30 p.m.

- Veronica Elsea had no updates for Santa Cruz County, and neither did Tricia Webber.
- Fred Nisen and Karie Lew, on behalf of Disability Rights CA, stated that they're working with Shasta County in finding a new voting systems vendor to assist disabled voters since the Shasta County Board of Supervisors voted to end their contract with Dominion. There is concern that Shasta will not be able comply with mandates regarding voting access if they do not engage in a contract with a voting systems vendor. DRC issued a public statement on this issue.

3. SOS Updates

- Office of Voting Systems Technology Assessment (OVSTA)
 - Debra Ledsinger from SOS updated the committee on the ongoing process of testing various voting systems. She showed that the ES&S Version 6.3.0.2 system is currently in testing. Dominion's Democracy Suite 5.17, Robis Elections Inc.'s AskED Version 3.4, and ES&S Version 6.5.0.2 are all at the stage of having their application reviewed, while Hart's Verity Voting 3.2 system has had their application received, but not yet reviewed. Debra Ledsinger said that more information will be shared with the VAAC as testing continues.
- Voter's Choice Act (VCA)
 - Adam Quintana introduced himself and explained his role in SOS working closely with VCA counties who are working on their Election Administration Plan (EAP) renewals and those counties that are transitioning to the VCA model.
 - The SOS VCA team is having regular monthly meetings with VCA counties to support them and make sure their EAPs are submitted by Sept 7, 2023. The VCA team recently met with Alameda County and were updated on the county's VAAC meetings. Alameda is struggling with recruitment and attendance for their VAAC. They are working to keep members engaged and they wanted to know if Disability Rights CA can offer advice and support.
 - Fred Nisen responded that Alameda has often been provided support and suggestions, and that it would help if they were to reach out directly.

- Veronica Elsea added that recruitment comes down to connecting with disability groups to see if any of their members would like to get involved with the county VAAC.
- Britney Stonesifer mentioned in the chat that several organizations have contacted Alameda ROV (Registrar of Voters) to ask that they put their meeting schedule online, but they have yet to do so. Fred Nisen stated that he believes there is a VAAC schedule for Alameda but that they don't share the schedule with the public. He also said that new VCA counties should hold VAAC and LAAC meeting before holding public consultation meetings so the VAAC and LAAC members can help plan the meetings and encourage meeting attendance. Adam Quintana went over those guidelines that had been recently released by SOS regarding establishing committee groups and said that SOS is strongly encouraging the counties to implement these committees and that they are moving in the right direction. Fred Nisen added that in his experience, a VAAC can assist counties in getting people to attend EAP consultation meetings.

4. VAAC Working Groups

- Resource Tool for Voting Machines
 - Veronica Elsea said that this working group is active and trying to create a resource to assist counties and voters with utilizing accessible voting machines. She stated that it is important to create consistency across the counties as they identify ways to inform voters on accessibility options, provide better instructions for using voting machines, conduct poll worker trainings so that they can assist people with disabilities, and training poll workers on the machines. Right now, the working group is trying to understand more about what counties are doing in this area. Counties that are VCA counties have this information in their EAP, but some details are not included. Veronica Elsea suggested it would be good to have the SOS to distribute a survey to all the counties to ask how they handle certain situations. The group is currently working to develop these questions. Examples include questions on how the counties conduct voter outreach, how they educate voters on accessible voting technology, how they train poll workers to use the machines and assist the public, and whether the counties conduct any post-election reviews regarding accessibility.
 - Veronica Elsea asked the committee if they think such a survey would be a good thing to do and if they would be willing to vote

on the issue in order to make an official recommendation to SOS.

- Dianne Russell asked if some of the information is already out there and if it could be easily collected. She also agreed that it would be a good idea to do a survey. Veronica Elsea responded that there is a lot of information out there, such as in the county EAPs, but that they're thinking more about using the survey to get the answers in a standard form that is easy to reference. The group would like to eventually release a best practices document to encourage consistency across the state.
- Veronica Elsea asked if there needs to be a vote to advance this idea, and Ryan said he would double check to see if there is a process in place requiring a vote and they agreed they would visit this again in April. Mike Somers mentioned that the committee will need a vote in order to officially recommend the project to SOS for approval.
- Petitions/Signature Verification
 - Veronica Elsea said the working group is focusing on understanding the issues facing the disability community when it comes to signing petitions and being involved in the petitions process. The committee is wondering what accommodations are currently available to disabled people who are interested in circulating petitions or supporting them, and how SOS can create updated guidelines to better allow disabled people to engage with the petition process. The group has put together some questions concerning these issues and Veronica Elsea wanted to know how to bring these questions to SOS's attention and be given updated guidelines that are accessible to the public.
 - Steven Carda responded that questions and concerns that are submitted to SOS can be answered or given consideration. Veronica Elsea asked if the questions need to be submitted by the committee at large, and Steven Carda said they do not, and that SOS will look to provide clarity on the questions raised. Veronica Elsea asked about updates to SOS guidelines on petitions, and Steven Carda said that the guidelines are available for 2024 and that they are on the SOS Elections website and can be found by clicking on the option for "Ballot Measures" and then selecting "How to Qualify an Initiative".
- County Local VAACs
 - Maria Coronel mentioned that the working group is reaching out to county ROVs to see if they currently have an established

VAAC. They are searching for information through the county websites on county VAACs and their meeting schedules. They haven't been able to contact all the ROVs and are still working to create a full list with information on county VAACs and to share this information with SOS so they can display it on their website.

- Jan Bell added that the state LAAC is doing a survey and were wondering if Daneka can share those survey findings with the committee. Mike mentioned that the survey report is still under review but that the data will be forthcoming.
- Veronica Elsea mentioned that she was under the assumption that working groups cannot directly contact county ROVs and she wanted to make sure the working group is contacting ROVs properly. Jan Bell clarified that they are only looking to get information on the VAAC's meetings. Mike responded regarding working groups contacting ROVs and said that it is true that groups should be directing their activities through SOS in terms of getting permission to advance on certain projects. Mike said that it is important for the committee to focus on providing guidance to SOS, but not to act as an arm of SOS in terms of conducting activities and making recommendations. Jan Bell responded that this is good information and she reiterated that their working group is looking to recommend that the SOS gather information on all the counties' VAAC meeting schedules and post them on the SOS website. Jan Bell asked for a vote from the VAAC on this issue.
- Fred Nisen said that some counties say they have a VAAC, but they only meet once a year or every two years. Jan Bell responded that she feels that underscores the point of centralizing the information.
- Veronica Elsea mentioned that a formal recommendation on this could be made in April along with a presentation of the data the working group has already collected. Mike thanked the group and he agreed with Veronica Elsea's recommendation for the working group to make a more formal recommendation in April to the VAAC.
- VAAC Toolkit
 - Dianne Russell said that she and Fred Nisen are working on the new VAAC toolkit and trying to make it accessible as a hard copy and on the internet. The group is prepared to have members access the VAAC toolkit and to provide feedback on accessibility and the contents of the toolkit.

- Veronica Elsea asked where the toolkit will be presented and how the people viewing it will know where it's from. Dianne Russell said it will be on the SOS website.
- Veronica Elsea stated that the VAAC members may not be fully qualified to assess the digital accessibility issues and that it may require a more official evaluation. Dianne Russell said that the Department of Rehabilitation may be able to advise on it. Fred Nisen agreed that he hopes SOS will get the appropriate experts to review the toolkit before it goes online. Mike responded that the SOS web team will be responsible for making sure that the toolkit will be accessible.
- Veronica Elsea asked if the group will be able to bring the toolkit to the committee for further feedback and Dianne Russell replied that the group will do this through our chairperson Ryan wherein, he will send it out to all VAAC members.
- Sarah Harris suggested that anything that is published should be done so in HTML, and as a PDF and an audio file.
- Deaf or Hard of Hearing
 - Jan Bell said that prior to COVID they had been meeting with people from the Deaf and Hard of Hearing community, and that they learned that American Sign Language (ASL) is the primary language of community members and that many may not be proficient in English, despite people's assumptions. The second thing they learned is that most Deaf voters do not vote because they find it confusing and intimidating. Jan Bell mentioned that some respondents mentioned that a 2020 video in ASL on election information from SOS had been very helpful. She also said that many Deaf and Hard of Hearing voters have questions about statewide propositions, as well as political party affiliation and they want to know more about what the parties stand for. Jan Bell recommended that SOS send out a letter to all political parties to see if they would be able to make a statement of their purpose in ASL.

5. Registering and Voting by Mail in the Safe at Home Program

- Liz Hall, Safe-at-Home program director, commented on questions from the VAAC:
 - Question: Explain the sign-up process for all voters, specifically for blind voters.

Answer: Liz Hall explained the application process and said that

the welcome packet is sent out upon enrollment, along with a Confidential Voter Registration Card (CVRC) for the applicant to complete. The CVRC is not accessible to blind voters, and this was addressed recently through a workaround, but Liz Hall agreed that a permanent and viable solution needs to be developed. Her team is working with SOS Elections to obtain a PDF that can be easily accessed. Liz Hall also mentioned the issue of blind voters in the Safe-at-Home program not being able to use voting machines, since they would not be able to do so confidentially.

- Question: Explain the voting process for Safe-at-Home voters who vote in person or vote via remote access vote-by-mail (RAVBM). What accommodations have been made for blind voters?

Answer: Liz Hall said that Safe-at-Home voters cannot use vote-by-mail (VBM) due to their inability to remain confidential while using voting machines. Veronica Elsea mentioned that VBM for blind voters is difficult due to the accessibility issues associated with VBM. Ryan said that Elections will look to getting some answers concerning that. Regina Brink from the California Council of the Blind stated that blind voters routinely sacrifice privacy as voters in order to cast a ballot, and that we are still a long way off from allowing disabled voters to cast a ballot easily and privately. She said there is still much to do to resolve these issues.

- Question: Does each county organize its own version of the Safe-at-Home program? Does SOS provide guidance which could cover voters with disabilities who need to be entered into the program?

Answer: Liz Hall responded that each county does have procedures on how they work their own confidential programs. SOS provides guidelines on how to maintain confidentiality.

- Question: Who is the main contact for a blind voter who cannot vote because an address is required?

Answer: Liz Hall said that Registrar of Voters (ROVs) are the entities that act as the main contact for assisting voters. Ryan said that the voter hotline is also available for anyone with questions concerning voting.

- Question: Are there draft plans for this program that need to be

improved or set up?

Answer: Liz Hall reiterated that they are working with SOS Elections on obtaining a PDF version of the Confidential Voter Registration Card (CVRC).

- Question: How do voters with disabilities learn about the Safe-at-Home program?

Answer: Liz Hall responded that information can be found on the SOS website or by calling a coordinating enrolling agency or by calling the direct Safe-at-Home number.

- Veronica Elsea said that some counties require addresses for accessing the RAVBM and was wondering if they could jeopardize a voter's confidentiality. Liz Hall responded that as long as the information is not listed on any public databases the address information should remain confidential. Tricia also pointed out that there are different certified VBM systems and different RAVBM forms as well depending on the vendor, and that this accounts for the different practices of various counties.

6. Electronic Ballot Return

- Fred Nisen said Disability Rights CA is trying to get an electronic ballot return bill into the legislature to assist voters with print disabilities. They are trying to find an author for their bill before the deadline on Friday. Fred Nisen mentioned that the hold-up is because legislators have been waiting to see if the Secretary of State will withdraw her opposition to the bill, which she declined to do last year. He said his organization has been in contact with SOS staff and are still awaiting a response. Erric Garris from the SOS Legislative office responded that without a written or formally introduced bill SOS cannot offer an endorsement. Fred Nisen said that it would be good to at least be able to say that the Secretary has no position on the bill and Erric Garris agreed that such a statement would be appropriate. Erric Garris and Fred Nisen also agreed to meet soon on this issue.
- Sarah offered a comment underscoring the importance of resolving the RAVBM issues for disabled voters, including those enrolled in the Safe-at-Home program. Erric Garris agreed and said that the Secretary's team is continuing to address the issue.
- Regina urged the committee to look at the efforts of Massachusetts Elections, which has a sizable blind and low vision population and may be able to share some data. Regina encouraged the VAAC and SOS to find a solution to this problem to ensure accessibility and privacy for disabled voters.

7. General Election Issues

- Due to the meeting going overtime, the committee decided to move this agenda items to the April meeting.

8. Voting Trucks

- Due to the meeting going overtime, the committee decided to move this agenda items to the April meeting.

9. Public Comments and Future Agenda Items

- Due to the meeting going overtime, the committee decided to move the outstanding agenda items to the April meeting.
- An opportunity for public comment was offered, but no comments were made.
- There was an acknowledgement that multiple working groups may have project recommendations that will require a vote at the next meeting.

10. Adjournment