

# Best Practices for Recruiting Candidates for Local Government Boards & Councils

Every two to four years, community members bravely put their name on a ballot, signing up for the chance to serve as a leader on a city council, a county board or a special district board. But how did those candidates get started? Where did they learn about the opportunity to serve? Where did they go for more information?

## The Local Agency Role

Local government agencies have the authority to independently promote opportunities for residents to serve on their boards. Agencies can also clarify the roles and responsibilities of those board positions, which can go a long way to demonstrate organizational transparency. Why is this important? Because this process is an opportunity for local agencies to accomplish a few key objectives:

- **Raise awareness.** By informing residents about opportunities to serve as a policy-maker, cities, counties and special districts are also increasing the awareness of their agency's role in the community and the impact local leaders have on decision-making.
- **Reinforce relevance.** Even when community members understand why civic leadership is essential, they may not understand the specific role played by a board, council or policy-maker in shaping the agency's budget and policies. By promoting opportunities to serve and explaining exactly what that service entails, agencies can provide clarity and transparency about an organization's relevance and function.
- **Build relationships.** By sharing details about the opportunity to serve on a special district, city or county governing body, agency officials can engage people with diverse opinions and experiences that better reflect the community's values. Broad-based community outreach and education can help mobilize residents and build relationships that extend to other important agency activities.

The Institute for Local Government conducted a survey of more than 60 city, county and special district organizations about their existing outreach and education efforts to potential candidates for elected office. Those survey

responses have been incorporated into this tip-sheet. By learning from other agencies and understanding expert recommendations for authentic public engagement, local leaders can customize an approach that works best for their community.

## Communicate about Opportunities to Serve

State law, specifically election code, dictates the timelines for candidate filing and nomination periods. While these are the official requirements for posting and noticing elections, many cities, counties and special districts go beyond the minimum requirements to ensure members of the public are aware of the opportunity to run for local public office.

### Promote Service Opportunities: Where, When and How Often?

Increasingly, cities, counties and special districts are actively promoting their vacancies and elections in a variety of ways to ensure a broad reach. The most popular strategies are to utilize the agency's website, flyers, and direct outreach to community-based organizations. Additionally, survey respondents indicated that their agencies also promote elections via social and traditional media.

Outreach to potential candidates can be conducted in variety of ways. Best practices include:

- Sharing election, candidate and board vacancy information with business, non-profit and community leaders for distribution to their networks.
- Outreaching directly to the residents attending board meetings and community events.
- Providing updates on elections and appointed service opportunities in official newsletters, bills and e-newsletters.
- Promoting the election along with any opportunities to serve when the Registrar of Elections declares the filing period for the general and primary elections.
- Collaborating with faith-based, diverse and multicultural organizations as outreach partners.

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*Try to get others more involved, use Facebook, newsletters, posting in the community, participate in community activities, ask questions of residents to see what piques their interest.”*

– Suzanne Lindenfeld, Rancho Murieta Community Services District

### Identify a Primary Point of Contact for Candidates

Is it clear to the public which agency official is responsible for outreach about elections and vacancies? Organizations surveyed identified that the board clerk, administrative or executive assistant or the executive officer often have the formal responsibility for serving as the point of contact for election outreach and board/council vacancies. Agencies also noted that informal points of contact like current elected officials, local political parties, and community groups, such as chambers of commerce, can also conduct supplemental outreach about public service opportunities on governing boards and councils. Because information can come from numerous sources, it is very important for the official agency contact to give consistent and impartial information to anyone who requests it, and for no favoritism to be shown.

*As the Elections Official for the agency, I need to be careful to remain neutral and provide the same information to all. Staff needs to provide access to information and/or resources but should not give preferential treatment to any one individual.”*

– Dawn G. Abrahamson, Vallejo City Clerk

### Demystify Public Service

In addition to promoting board vacancies and elections, local government agencies can also help educate potential candidates about the election process as well as provide information and training on what it means to be a candidate and office-holder.

The transition from being a candidate to serving as a policy-maker can be challenging. Agency officials can help demystify elections -- and public service in general -- by outlining the roles and responsibilities of a decision-maker for the organization. Cities, counties and special districts may benefit by hosting information sessions or providing background materials about their agencies and the opportunities to serve through documents like Frequently Asked Questions and Fact Sheets. Community members

may also benefit from hearing officials speak on a variety of topics, including:

- Campaign ethics and candidate requirements
- Ethics and transparency in office, including the Ralph M. Brown Act
- The roles and responsibilities of a local policy-maker
- How policy is made and implemented at a city, county or special district

Agencies can host information sessions at community centers or municipal buildings, or they can work with community organizations to provide a conveniently located venue and promotional support.

### THE CALIFORNIA VOTING RIGHTS ACT

The California Voting Rights Act (CVRA) of 2001 expanded upon the federal Voting Rights Act of 1965 with the goal of preventing the marginalization of minority voters and increasing opportunities for minorities to elect a representative of their choice. In 2015, the law was further updated to clarify that “a voter who is a member of a protected class may bring an action in superior court to enforce the provisions of the CVRA.” Many local governments throughout California are responding to this legislation by transitioning from at-large to district-based elections. This underscores the importance of broad outreach to and relationship building with potential candidates from diverse backgrounds.

For more information, see <http://bit.ly/cvraleginfo>

### Do More than the Bare Minimum

Many cities, counties and special districts go beyond the official nomination period outlined by the county registrar of voters and promote upcoming elections 3, 6, or 12 months before the nomination period opens. This extended promotional timeframe helps agencies reach residents that may not already be thinking about public service.

*Think outside the box and try to reach people that aren't regulars. We've had great success with "new" candidates getting elected and offering valuable input and representing groups not previously represented.”*

– Jessica Blair, City of Half Moon Bay

## REACHING BEYOND THE “USUALS”

ILG has a number of resources to help local governments increase and broaden outreach to their communities. A few tips to help you reach a broader, more representative section of your community include:

- **Develop Relationships** - Less engaged communities are often critical of the public engagement process. Developing personal relationships with the community can lead to a more inclusive process and community buy-in.
- **Communicate Respectfully** - Stay current with your community’s changing demographics and develop culturally and linguistically appropriate communications material and strategies. Recognize the importance of communicating with residents in their first language to ensure their maximum understanding of issues. As appropriate, promote public service opportunities through ethnic media and other intermediary organizations that already serve and work with the communities you wish to reach.
- **Be Flexible** – Hold public meetings or other public information sessions in community settings that are known and accessible to the communities you wish to reach. Explore what engagement tools and processes will best meet the needs and conditions of specific populations.
- **Stay in Touch** - As appropriate, keep current lists of organizations and individuals interested in civic issues and keep them informed of opportunities to participate.

Find additional tips and resources for authentic public engagement, on ILG’s website at [www.ca-ilg.org/engagement](http://www.ca-ilg.org/engagement).

## Additional Resources

ILG has a number of resources to help local agencies implement mutually beneficial public engagement and governance strategies. The following materials are available on the Institute’s website:

- What is Public Engagement? [www.ca-ilg.org/document/what-public-engagement](http://www.ca-ilg.org/document/what-public-engagement)
- Community Leadership Programs: [www.ca-ilg.org/post/community-leadership-programs-empowering-future-leaders](http://www.ca-ilg.org/post/community-leadership-programs-empowering-future-leaders)
- Beyond the Usuals: [www.ca-ilg.org/node/3367](http://www.ca-ilg.org/node/3367)
- Attributes of Effective Governance Teams: [www.ca-ilg.org/leadership](http://www.ca-ilg.org/leadership)