JOINT OVERSIGHT HEARING: SENATE COMMITTEE ON ELECTIONS AND CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENTS & ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON ELECTIONS AND REDISTRICTING

Senator Ben Allen and Assembly Member Sebastian Ridley-Thomas, Chairs

STATEWIDE VOTER TURNOUT

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TESTIMONY BY JENNIFER PAE
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Introduction

Good afternoon. My name is Jennifer Pae and I am the Project Manager for Voter Service and Education at the League of Women Voters of California Education Fund (LWVCEF). For the past 95 years, the League of Women Voters has advocated to expand and protect the right to vote. The LWVCEF continues this commitment by conducting voter services and civic education activities that build participation in the democratic process. Before I begin to describe the LWVCEF's recent launch of the *Best Practices Manual for Official Voter Information Guides* project to increase voter participation, I would like to share my personal story for some perspective of why I came to this work and why it is so important.

This past year my family celebrated the 40th anniversary of arriving in the United States. My mother worked the night shift while going to school and raising two young girls. She had been in this country for more than 25 years but hadn't registered to vote until I asked her to when I turned 18 years old. Since then, she's called me during every election to help her with her ballot.

Imagine if voting in California was truly accessible to all eligible Californians. We know the electorate is older, richer, and more educated, but imagine if the barriers to participate were eliminated so those who vote less often−the young, poor, and less educated−had an equal opportunity to get registered and vote.

When we look at the changing demographics of our state, we know we have a lot of work ahead of us to engage those that are most disenfranchised, particularly young people and communities of color. This is why the LWVCEF is proud to continue to partner with the State Library to distribute the *Easy Voter Guide* in five languages, which has been community reviewed since 1994. Furthermore, we are excited about a pilot partnership during the 2014 election between the League's Smart Voter and MapLight to produce an improved Voter's Edge, a comprehensive nonpartisan online voting guide about California's elections including campaign funding sources.

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Best Practices Manual for Official Voter Information Guides

Although many factors contribute to low voter turnout, we believe that voter information is an important tool to engage and expand the electorate. To continue this tradition of providing accessible and quality voter information, LWVCEF has released a *Best Practices Manual for Official Voter Information Guides* as an easy-to-use resource for election officials and community groups working to educate California's diverse electorate. Through this initiative, we aim to make voter information more effective, more inviting, and more useful by giving the right kind of information to voters at the right time, in the right way.

Supported by a grant from The James Irvine Foundation and in partnership with the Center for Civic Design and the Future of California Elections, the manual was informed by over a year's worth of research with diverse stakeholders, including election officials, community organizations, good government groups, and frequent and infrequent voters from across California. The 100 research participants, who included voters, potential voters, and infrequent voters that closely matched California's demographics, underpin all of the conclusions and recommendations.

Our research uncovered three main insights into improving voter information:
1. Use of plain language can't be overemphasized
2. Good layout and thoughtful visual presentation are important for comprehension
3. Voter guides are an important civic literacy tool.

Plain Language

Based on our research and our experiences during the *Easy Voter Guide* community review sessions with adult literacy students, it is clear that voters have a strong desire for information in plain language. This includes providing the right information at the right level of detail and organizing the information in an easy to follow path.

For example, the Voter Bill of Rights can provide useful information, but it must be accessible to voters. During an interview at the Berkeley Public Library, a potential voter learned he was eligible to vote as an ex-felon after carefully reading through it. In many of the interviews with infrequent voters and new voters, they stopped to read the Voter Bill of Rights completely and carefully. However, they also found it hard to read and asked questions about what it said. A bilingual low-literacy participant stated "These are things I need to know…but some of them are confusing."

Oftentimes election terms were also difficult to understand. Research participants were unfamiliar with important terms that are key to understanding elections. As a result, some participants skipped or misunderstood sections of the voter guide. The most complicated election term was the description of the "Top Two Primary"; ultimately, this language had to be removed from the voter guide prototype because it was so confusing. Research participants needed hints to help them interpret the information, such as descriptions of the offices: what do they do? How will the winner of the contest impact my life? Why should I care?

We also know that if the voter information is written in plain language, this provides better quality translations. During a potential voter interview in Los Angeles with our partners at the Center for Asian Americans United for Self Empowerment (CAUSE), a recently naturalized immigrant was reviewing a prototype voter guide in Chinese and she became frustrated. She said "this makes me angry" because the translations were so poor she couldn't follow along and felt defeated.

Layout and Visual Presentation
In all of the research, participants wanted, liked, and used a table of contents when one was available. Voters want a roadmap to the voter guide and the elections process. They relied heavily on visual cues and the typography. The layout and visual presentation greatly influences whether the voter information will be easy to read and understand.

In the first round of user research, we asked participants to select pages from a book of samples that they would want in their own voter guide. The five pages participants chose most often all used visual layout effectively. In particular, the candidate and ballot information should be organized in a way that helps voters see both the overview and details. We shouldn't let the voters get lost in the details when there are many candidates and measures in any given election.

Furthermore, we recognize many counties are limited in their flexibility of design and layout based on what is required of them and how many pages they can afford. From the size of font (which should be at least 12 points) to the proper inclusion of a sample ballot, counties need the resources to provide voter guides that will effectively inspire and educate voters to participate in our elections.

Civic Literacy
The evidence from our research suggests that an official voter guide is an information device, not an engagement device. However, it may be the only source of voter information that many people see and should be used as a tool for civic literacy, especially recognizing that they may be a recent immigrant or someone who did not graduate from high school and attend college and may not be familiar with the election process. The voter guide can be a tipping point, particularly for those who may see it from a family member or friend, if people can be encouraged to take the first step and read it. A young potential voter stated, "This is stuff I hadn't thought about or paid much attention to…voter rights, measures. I might try to do more research. More interested in voting now."

During the interviews, we found that new and infrequent voters didn't know where to start. Until people start to make sense of why they want to participate, the details can be confusing. It takes a lot of energy and desire to take the information apart, and voters sometimes need more than even the best guide can deliver. Participant after participant in the research stumbled over aspects of elections from terminology to a basic understanding of the process. It was clear they needed personalized information to help guide them through the election. For example, making the availability of languages visible in all versions of the voter guide and a voter's polling place information clearly visible.

It was also a challenge to learn about and compare candidates and how ballot measures will affect them. It is important to use the structure and content of the voter guide to close civic literacy gaps. One of the most helpful tips we can provide is to ensure the voter information has been tested with low-literacy and limited English proficiency voters so it meets their needs.

Recommendations
We hope that using our recommendations will lead to voter information that raises voter confidence and increase participation. Fortunately, some of these ideas are already being implemented in one or more California counties. However, some of these recommendations face regulatory, legislative, or financial barriers. We look forward to partnering with you to identify these barriers and make the necessary changes to better serve California's current and future voters.