



**To:** Little Hoover Commission

**Date:** September 6, 2017

**Re:** September 28, 2017 Voter Participation Hearing in Los Angeles

Dear Commissioners,

Thank you for the opportunity to share our perspectives on voter participation in Los Angeles County. We hope our written testimony can provide insight on the ways African-American and Latino voters in South Los Angeles can continue to participate in the electoral process after the implementation of the Voters Choice Act.

Included in our testimony is a brief background on Community Coalition, areas of concern regarding implementation of California's Voters Choice Act in Los Angeles County, and suggestions for ways voters can continue to be empowered through the modernization of voting, rather than disenfranchised.

### **Background on Community Coalition**

Community Coalition was founded in 1990 by now-Congresswoman Karen Bass to involve those who were most affected by the crack cocaine epidemic in transforming South Los Angeles' social and economic conditions. Congresswoman Bass believed everyday residents needed to be involved in developing and advocating for solutions that would address the epidemic's root causes. For over 25 years, the organization has engaged everyday South LA residents in meaningful and successful civic participation and community change efforts. The organization's mission is "to help transform the social and economic conditions in South Los Angeles that foster addiction, crime, violence and poverty by building a community institution capable of involving thousands in creating, influencing and changing public policy."

### **South Los Angeles Demographics and Voter Participation**

Community Coalition works alongside underserved voters and the primarily African-American and Latino residents who reside in South LA. These are the individuals who are typically left out of the decision-making process, which exacerbates the area's poor outcomes and history of public disinvestment.

South LA (bordered by the 105 Freeway to the south, La Cienega Boulevard to the west, the 10 Freeway to the north and Alameda Street to the east) is home to 900,000 primarily Black (32%) and Latino (62%) residents. The median household income is less than



\$26,000 with nearly 60% of households living 150% below poverty compared to only 27% in Los Angeles County.

There are 303,887 voters in South LA. However, in 2011, an estimated 80% of South LA voters were unlikely, new, or occasional voters who were either new to the electorate or had low turnout, even in statewide elections. The Coalition aims to improve community conditions by empowering these everyday residents to take strategic civic action.

### **Voter Engagement Efforts**

Community Coalition has a rich history of civic action. In 2009, the organization launched a dynamic civic engagement program to engage the community around voting and electoral politics. To date, Community Coalition has contacted over 291,000 voters in South Los Angeles. Due to our voter engagement efforts and partnerships with statewide organizations such as California Calls and YVOTE, our neighborhoods vote at nearly twice the rate of the county average. Additionally, our civic engagement efforts reach an estimated 13% of South LA voters, annually.

Community Coalition centers its civic engagement programs on an Integrated Voter Engagement (IVE) process. Rather than waiting for election cycles to engage with voters, the Coalition talks to voters throughout the year and in between election cycles. This practice has helped us to develop relationships with and mobilize new, infrequent and occasional voters. Our outreach efforts include door-to-door canvassing, phone banking, texting and engaging eligible voters via creative community-based events such as an annual music festival.

Our most effective method of outreach is door-to-door canvassing. We have found that the best way to communicate information effectively is by having conversations with voters face to face. This is a time consuming and resource heavy process, as we aim to make contact with thousands of voters each year.

### **Concerns with Implementation of SB 450**

The Coalition welcomes the modernization of the voting process, but chose to have a neutral stance on SB 450 as it moved through the state legislature last year. We did not actively oppose the bill, but had concerns with how low-income communities could be affected by the new model. With implementation on the horizon, we are committed to working with all parties involved to ensure that the South Los Angeles community isn't disenfranchised throughout the process. Our key concerns are outlined below.

- **Elimination of Polling Locations.** A great concern of ours revolves around the elimination of polling locations. The Vermont Knolls community in South LA saw a polling location change from March 2017 to May 2017. This confused voters who



had frequented the polling location for many years. Many voters we spoke to just before the May 7<sup>th</sup> election claimed they were not notified of the change in the polling location. Our most disenfranchised community members during this change were our elders who lived at the senior center where the polling location was previously housed. Many could not make the walk to the new location just a few blocks away. Based on our poll monitoring on election day, the new location, combined with inadequate notification of a change of site, and poor visibility resulted in lower turnout than during the election in March. Our fear is that widespread elimination of well-known, long-standing polling locations without an adequate public education plan could result in fewer South LA voters participating in the election process.

- **Accessibility of Vote Centers.** It is imperative that vote centers are placed strategically around the community and in a manner that speaks to the public safety needs of the community to ensure maximum accessibility. With familiar polling centers being eliminated, South LA residents will have to travel longer periods of time and outside of their neighborhoods to be able to vote. South Los Angeles has a history of disinvestment, and unfortunately that can translate to some residents not being able to travel to certain neighborhoods because of safety concerns. Recently, residents in Vermont Knolls and Green Meadows expressed concerns about participating in activities in King Estates, a neighborhood 5 miles north, because of concerns for their safety. We must allow voters to vote in environments where they feel safe. Having a vote center in a traditionally neutral location is not enough, especially when changes will cause voters to travel into unfamiliar neighborhoods. Having to travel further to safer locations could result in lower voter turnout from South LA residents.
- **Distances between Vote Centers.** The distance between vote centers is important as well. While the implementation will focus on ensuring that vote centers are not more than 30 minutes apart, 40 minutes in Los Angeles traffic can equate to only 3.9 miles. There needs to be clarification regarding the time it takes to travel between vote centers to reflect the realities of transportation, traffic and travel in Los Angeles.
- **Vote-by-Mail Paid Postage.** The modernization of voting through SB 450 makes it easier to participate via the Vote-by-Mail system. However, we are concerned that this will not be effectively utilized because postage is unpaid. Paying for postage or being forced to travel to a vote center or drop box could keep voters from casting a ballot all together. The Vote-by-Mail system would be most effective if postage is already paid.
- **Voter Outreach and Education.** Perhaps our greatest concern is around voter outreach and education. It is important that voter outreach and education is comprehensive, robust and effective. Relying on traditional methods of outreach



and education, such as sending an email, mailing a letter detailing changes, or posting a banner with information on a main street, are simply not enough. Furthermore, we can not rely on improved digital resources alone to prepare voters for the changes to the voting process. Many voters in South LA still struggle with access to digital resources.

- **Funding.** We are concerned about adequate funding to ensure effective implementation of SB 450.
- **Opt-In System.** Community Coalition operates as an anchor to several statewide coalitions. We are concerned that the opt-in system will result in a lack of a unified and communicable voting system. With voting systems varying by county, it could impair our collaboration with other organizations and localities trying to improve the voting conditions of low-income communities of color.

### **Suggestions for Implementation**

Some of our concerns regarding implementation can be mitigated through the following suggestions.

- **Robust Funding for Implementation.** Funding for proper outreach and education, paid postage and community participation is key to the effective implementation of SB 450.
- **Comprehensive Outreach and Education Plan.** A comprehensive and multi-layered plan should be enacted to ensure maximum outreach. We strongly advocate for a plan that includes direct voter outreach by trusted messengers, and mandates multiple contacts with voters. In addition to traditional methods, such as mailers and emails, outreach efforts must include methods where direct voter contact is prioritized, measured and evaluated. Community Coalition approaches our outreach and education through a “trusted messenger” model. Recent studies on community engagement show that marginalized communities are more receptive to information when it comes directly from someone from their community with whom they can relate. This has proven to be true with our outreach efforts in South LA.
- **Authentic Participation from Marginalized Communities.** It isn’t enough to have one hearing where community is allowed to voice their opinions about the implementation of the Voters Choice Act. Participation with the community must be ongoing, particularly in the communities where the potential for disenfranchisement is the greatest.
- **Collaborative Partnerships with the County and City Registrars.** Los Angeles County and City registrars should seek partnerships with Community Based Organizations (CBO’s) that have a trusted relationship with marginalized communities. These organizations, like Community Coalition, are often recognized



institutions within communities, and have deeply rooted relationships with residents in the communities in which they are located.

We are confident that SB 450 has the potential to improve voting systems across California and South Los Angeles. We hope that implementation is done thoughtfully, with adequate resources, and to the benefit of all voters.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Rosemarie Molina".

Rosemarie Molina  
Civic Engagement Coordinator

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