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Best Practices for Serving Native American Voters

Native American voters include members of federally recognized Tribes, state-recognized Tribes, Alaska Native communities, and non-federally recognized Tribal communities throughout the United States. Tribal nations are sovereign governments, with a government-to-government relationship with the United States. Election officials serving Native voters are working across jurisdictional lines, not merely conducting voter outreach.

Native voters live in Tribal communities, rural areas, and urban communities, and their voting experiences may vary depending on local circumstances and community needs.

Native communities may face unique barriers to voting that are not always reflected in traditional election planning. Understanding local needs and community-specific challenges can help election officials improve communication, plan more effectively, and provide election services that are accessible to Native voters.

This resource highlights best practices for election officials to support voter access, outreach, and election administration in Tribal and Native communities.

Tips

Build Relationships with Tribal and Native Communities

Strong partnerships with Tribal and Native communities help improve communication, planning, outreach, and voter participation.

- Build relationships early and maintain them over time, including in years when there is no election on the ballot.
- Consult Tribal governments, community leaders, and elders when developing election plans, policies, and voter outreach efforts.
- Maintain relationships with Tribal leaders, Tribal election officials, Native organizations, and urban Native groups through in-person participation in community events.
- Work with Tribal leaders to identify voting barriers and practical solutions. Report back when Tribal input shapes decisions publicly.
- Add Tribal governments and Native organizations to election communication and media outreach.

Understand Local Community Needs

Native communities have different needs and circumstances.

- Recognize that Native voters may live on Tribal lands, in cities and towns, or in rural areas.

- Include federally recognized Tribes, state-recognized Tribes, and non-federally recognized Tribal communities in outreach efforts.
- Understand state requirements related to Tribal IDs and non-traditional addresses.
- Consider local conditions that may affect voter participation, such as weather, road conditions, lack of mail service, or limited internet and cellular service.
- Ensure voting locations, outreach materials, and voting options are accessible to Native voters with disabilities.

Improve Election Planning and Mapping

Understanding Tribal community boundaries can help election officials better assess voter access needs and identify communities that may not be reflected in election data systems.

- Work with Tribal governments and community leaders to better understand Tribal and community boundaries.
- Use Geographic Information System (GIS), Tribal land reference data, and mapping resources to support election planning.
- Identify communities that may not be accurately reflected in voter registration or election management systems to ensure accurate addressing.
- When Tribal community information cannot be incorporated into existing systems, maintain reference maps and planning resources for internal use.

Improve Access to Voting

Long distances and limited infrastructure can make voting more difficult in some Tribal communities.

- Review travel distance from Tribal communities to voting locations.
- Consider offering temporary voting locations, vote centers, or mobile voting options where permitted by law.
- Place ballot drop boxes in locations that are easy for Tribal communities to access.
- Work with Tribal officials to resolve mail delivery or address-related challenges.

Expand Outreach and Voter Education

Native voters are more likely to participate when election information is clear, accessible, and shared through trusted sources.

- Share election information early and often, including:
  - Key election deadlines.
  - Mail ballot return dates, tracking options, and ballot cure information (if applicable).
- Provide clear guidance on address and identification requirements.
- Create outreach materials tailored to Tribal and Native communities.
- Use radio, flyers, social media, local partners, Tribal governments, and community events to share information.
- Consider public service announcements in communities with limited broadband access.

Support Language Access

Language assistance can help Native voters understand election information and voting procedures.

- Work with Tribal communities to identify local language assistance needs.
- Translate voter education materials and election materials into Native languages when appropriate and allowed by law.
- Review translated materials with Tribal communities or Native language speakers before distribution.
- Use Native languages in outreach materials, such as flyers, signs, and "I Voted" stickers.

Recruit and Train Election Workers

Well-trained election workers help voters feel informed, welcomed, and respected.

- Recruit bilingual election workers and interpreters who speak the Native languages used in the community.
- Recruit Tribal community members to serve as poll workers when possible.
- Train election workers on Tribal IDs, language assistance requirements, and nontraditional addresses.
- Include cultural awareness in poll worker training.

Prepare for Technology and Infrastructure Challenges

Some Native communities have been underserved by mail, broadband, and road infrastructure that makes voting more difficult.

- Develop backup plans for equipment or communication failures.
- Test election equipment before deployment.
- Prepare paper backup materials and contingency procedures.
- Plan for longer travel times and delayed technical support in remote areas.
- Coordinate with Tribal facilities on internet and power needs.

Additional Resources

- EAC Voting Access for Native Americans: Case Studies & Best Practices
- EAC Native Americans & Disability Access
- EAC Best Practices Unwritten Languages
- National Council on Disability (NCD): Understanding Disabilities in American Indian and Alaska Native Communities Toolkit Guide
- Department of Justice Language Minority Voting Rights
- Bureau of Indian Affairs- Tribal Leaders Directory for Federally Recognized Tribes