

Overview: The Books & Ballots program expands access to the ballot in rural and underserved areas by leveraging partnerships between Elections and County Libraries.

Challenge: Expanding voting opportunities is a critical objective for fostering a more inclusive democracy, but achieving this goal is challenging, especially when resources are limited. These challenges are often exacerbated by the fact that funding and resources are allocated to meeting and maintaining state and federal mandates leaving departmental resources constrained. Given the diversity of Monterey County, where resources, including voting opportunities, gravitate both by formula and need to areas that are more densely populated, the specific challenge focused on how to enhance and increase access to the democratic process to underserved and rural areas while continuing to meet mandates. Challenges included identifying how to efficiently increase civic engagement opportunities and participation in areas of need without taxing capacity of partner agencies or increasing election costs. Civic engagement opportunities include voter registration, voting, public observation, candidate filing, outreach/education, data services, accessibility and language assistance.

Solution: Books and Ballots leverages the partnership between the Monterey County Elections Department (MCE) and the Monterey County Free Libraries (MCFL). Libraries are widespread, trusted institutions that serve as community hubs that often keep hours outside of traditional business hours to serve their communities, making them ideal locations for voting, observation, candidate filing, accessing assistance, information and more from their local election official. By partnering with libraries, election officials can increase the number of accessible civic engagement opportunities without incurring the high costs associated with establishing new infrastructure. Libraries already provide many services to their communities, including public computer access, which can be utilized for voter registration and education. Furthermore, libraries have staff who are skilled in assisting the public, making them well-suited to also assist in the process. This approach expands access to civic engagement opportunities and the efficiency of elections by utilizing existing resources. By collaborating with libraries, counties can create more accessible, efficient, and cost-effective voting opportunities, ultimately strengthening democratic participation.

Innovation: The Books and Ballots program evolved from the MCE Flex Voting program in which MCE provided pop-up voting opportunities at community events. By partnering with MCFL, MCE was able to expand services, essentially bringing all election services normally only provided at the central office location to areas where local community members are at dates and times that are convenient to them. This has since expanded

from registration, voting, and observation to include candidate and campaign filing assistance for local schools and special districts contests in rural areas.

Results: The benefits of formalizing the Books and Ballots program include the use of familiar locations that often act as safe and trusted spaces for resources and information. MCFL have a built-in clientele of diverse members of their surrounding communities. Additionally, communications and social media reports were easily shared due to the familiarity of the locations and the predictability of when services would be available.

Ultimately, the program resulted in new registrants and early in-person voting. Voters who were skeptical of election processes were afforded the opportunity to interface with election officials and view firsthand, processes involved in maintaining the integrity of the ballot. Future voters, those community members under 18 visiting their libraries, were also able to engage with election officials, observe the voting process and walk away with MCE outreach material and a greater understanding of elections.

Often times, candidates are not considered when making efforts to expand access to the ballot. For schools and special districts, especially those in rural and underserved areas, candidates are the very same voters we seek to enfranchise. By enfranchising our candidates, we are providing a stronger ballot to our voters. Books and Ballots: Candidates and Campaigns, offers filing opportunities at convenient locations and times. In partnering with MCFL during regular library hours, MCE has been able to leverage facilities, secure technological infrastructure, and space recognition for a built-in audience of diverse community members. On days in which both remote and central office filings occurred concurrently, Books and Ballots locations saw the majority of daily filings with 50%, 71%, 58% and 100% of daily filings respectively.

Replicability: Given that existing resources were leveraged between county departments, there were no additional costs or limitations on the capacity of either department. If concurrent conflicting programs existed, Elections would provide a mobile voting unit for election services on library property. The program facilitated communication; social media posts were created by MCE and shared by both departments and the county communications team. A joint media release by the two departments expanded messaging and led to additional coverage of Books and Ballots events. Existing graphics were used for voter mailings.

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Additional Materials: <https://www.countyofmonterey.gov/home/showdocument?id=134447&t=638593236193646418>