

## Eleven Tips to Improve Public Engagement on Realignment Issues

Under the Public Safety Realignment Act (enacted through AB 109, AB 117 and related 2011 legislation), major changes are taking place in state and local government responsibilities for public safety and community corrections. Known as “realignment,” counties will now play an expanded role in treatment, post-release supervision, and detention of some adults who were previously the responsibility of the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation.

An important part of the success of such local realignment efforts is an informed, engaged and supportive public. This is especially the case given the significance and speed of these changes, their impacts on local agency operations now and in the future, the seriousness with which the public views public safety issues, and the incomplete information that many residents have on this topic.

Therefore, counties and other local agencies are seeking to inform the public about these changes in their public safety roles and activities and to involve residents and other stakeholders in the shaping of local public safety realignment plans. (See [www.ca-ilg.org/WhyEngage](http://www.ca-ilg.org/WhyEngage) for more on the benefits of public engagement.)

While each local situation is unique, the Institute for Local Government offers the following general tips to help guide effective public engagement relating to public safety realignment.

“Public engagement,” for these purposes, includes activities that provide opportunities to inform, consult with, and deliberate among residents and other stakeholders. (See [www.ca-ilg.org/WhatIsPublicEngagement](http://www.ca-ilg.org/WhatIsPublicEngagement).)

**1. Clarify Your Public Engagement Goals.** Determine the intended goal(s) of your public engagement meetings or other activities. Do you want to inform the public about public safety realignment, its requirements and its impacts, answer questions, and/or ask residents or others to identify values, concerns or recommendations that will help plan or guide the realignment undertaking?

Information sharing should be part of any effort, as should the opportunity for participants to ask questions. However, it can be very helpful to think about the specific areas where public input would be useful and to ask participants for their guiding views or recommendations on these specific points.

Approaches that include deliberation among participants, and more collective input will typically require more time, more meeting preparation, and good facilitation. Don’t set a

public engagement activity up for failure by trying to accomplish - or claim - more than available time and the chosen approach will allow.

**2. Clarify Your Participation Goals.** It is essential to be clear about *who* you want to participate. For your public engagement efforts are your targeted participants:

- Community leaders from across public sector, civic, business, religion and/or other sectors?
- Community-based or other non-governmental organizations that provide services related to public safety and community corrections?
- Issue-based and advocacy groups who have perspectives and recommendations to share?
- Neighborhood leaders or residents from neighborhoods where most of the affected offender populations will be living?
- Members of the general public already interested in public safety and corrections issues?
- Members of the public who may as yet have little interest or information about realignment and its ramification?
- Individuals who have been incarcerated?
- Others?

There can of course be multiple participation goals. However, each audience may require a different outreach or recruitment strategy, and in some cases perhaps a different meeting process as well.

Often, there may be interest in holding one or more meetings for significant organized stakeholders (from public, civic, business, religious, and other sectors) to provide them with realignment-related information. If this to be done, it is nonetheless important to have a broader public engagement plan, including a communication plan, through which others will know when and how they will also have the opportunity to participate. It is best not to begin a public engagement effort with some already feeling excluded.

Those with concerns about the potential negative impacts of public safety/community corrections realignment are especially important to inform and engage.

**3. Clarify and Create Appropriate Public Engagement Activities.** Choose the public engagement activity or process (or more than one approach) that will best fit your goal(s) and intended audience(s). Often these activities are oriented to either *inform* the public or to *solicit their views and recommendations*. While these activities may include online or media/communications strategies, the following ideas are primarily relevant to face-to-face public engagement meetings:

- **Activities to Inform.** If your intent is mainly to inform, then public outreach and meetings that feature prepared materials, PowerPoint slides, and presentations by relevant agency officials may suffice. Ensure that there is agreement by all relevant agencies about the content of the information and materials to be distributed or presented and, as appropriate, a role for each of these agencies in public meetings and material preparation.

To include an opportunity for questions and answers have a designated facilitator and an agreed upon process for questions to be identified and answered. At times, it can be useful to have someone facilitate who is not a representative of an involved local agency, although this is situational.

A keynote speaker, with expertise on some aspect of the local realignment planning, may provide useful information to attendees. However, having a panel of representatives from the Community Corrections Partnership (CCP) itself can present an important statement of local government collaboration and commitments to the realignment success. In many cases, a panel or panels of speakers from the CCP, from other jurisdictions successfully addressing similar issues, and from the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, may be appropriate.

To include a component for questions, have a designated facilitator and a process chosen (and explained to participants) for questions to be identified and answered.

#### **Using Written Question/Comment Cards**

It is generally best to use submitted written *question or comment* cards only if there are a large number of participants or if you anticipate the need for a more controlled process.

If a process for submitting question cards is used, one option is for the questions to be read by the facilitator. However, it's generally better to use question cards only to prioritize questions and to introduce the speakers and have them ask their questions themselves. The use of question cards does allow the facilitator to aggregate similar questions, to possibly get more questions addressed, and to use the available time most efficiently.

As with any sort of intermediate process that may be perceived by the public as an attempt to "screen" or "censure" comments or questions, the use of these submitted cards is usually best reserved for larger or potentially unwieldy meetings. However some members of the public are more comfortable having their question or comments read by another rather than becoming a "public" speaker themselves.

It is often helpful to have questioners and those responding begin by identifying themselves. If possible, it is useful to have notes taken of the questions and answers and to make these notes available to participants and/or to post them on the web pages of the appropriate agency or agencies.

**- Activities to Solicit Views and Information.** It can be helpful to allow a period of time for participants to ask clarifying questions prior to the opportunity for comments and recommendations as this may add to the quality of the ideas and opinions that are expressed.

In addition to the opportunity to hear general comments from the public, meeting organizers may also identify those topics or choices about realignment opportunities, challenges or plans for which local agencies would benefit by having more public input. For instance, in addition to simply asking for general comments, attendees could be asked for their ideas or responses to particular questions or proposed actions. This could relate to a particular proposed element of a local realignment plan or more of a “process” matter, such as how the public would like to be kept informed of realignment progress.

#### **Offer Different Avenues for Learning & Participation**

Offering the public different avenues to learn about an issue - and different ways to become involved - adds to the number and range of residents and groups who will be effectively informed and engaged.

Use multiple outreach and communication opportunities to make information available, including local government websites, appropriate media (including ethnic media), area organization and congregation communication channels, etc. These same channels can be used to attract participation to public engagement meetings and processes.

Public engagement processes often focus on either: a) asking for *individual* comments or ideas; or b) the opportunity for participants to deliberate (a back and forth, reasoned civil discussion, often in small groups) and develop a more *collective* set of participant views, recommendations or ranked choices.

Of course this latter option requires more preparation and meeting time, a skilled facilitator, and the commitment (on the part of decision makers) to seriously consider the information generated. The benefits, however, include a greater understanding of the public’s realignment-related views and values and the potential for a more informed and community-supported realignment plan.

One of many caveats to this more public deliberation approach is whether you have people in the room (or who will be involved in the overall public engagement process) who are generally reflective of the community and its views. It is also best to frame requests for public ideas and recommendations in ways that are consistent with the information participants have or that you provide as part of the meeting process. (For a number of important questions and principles to guide effective public engagement, see [www.ca-ilg.org/publicparticipation](http://www.ca-ilg.org/publicparticipation) and [www.ca-ilg.org/publicengagementprinciples](http://www.ca-ilg.org/publicengagementprinciples).)

**4. Ensure Transparency.** For the development of public safety realignment plans, it is important that the planning itself, as well as any public engagement effort, be transparent to all and inclusive of appropriate partners. This can be a critical element of success over the shorter and longer term. This includes the involvement of local officials

and the public throughout the planning process and the inclusion of relevant agencies and organizations in the preparation of public information or engagement efforts.

**5. Educate Your Audience.** Public safety and community corrections responsibilities and issues can be confusing in the best and most stable of times. Given the changing state/local responsibilities in this area, the often confusing media accounts, the short timeline for making significant changes, and the uncertainty of longer-term funding, it's not surprising that residents and other stakeholders will have different understandings of what "realignment" means for their community.

This suggests that almost any public engagement meeting or process should have a segment of information sharing. This may include a concise background on the relevant legislation, the new and evolving responsibilities of local and state agencies, estimates of the new caseload impacts resulting from realignment, and what is known and unknown about available funding.

For all these reasons it is important to provide appropriate information to public engagement meeting participants (and often to the general public as well). Avoid acronyms, give the names and titles of participating/presenting agencies and agency representatives, and offer plain language descriptions of how realignment arrangements will work.

It is usually helpful to have copies of the county's realignment plan available at any public meeting, as well as information about where it can be found online. Such a resource sheet could also contain links to local agencies/organizations involved in realignment, as well as other informational sites.<sup>1</sup>

### **Use Informational Materials and Visuals Effectively**

Develop materials with the interests and knowledge of the intended audience in mind. What information will the public need that responds to their likely questions or concerns?

Informational materials should be straightforward and easy to follow, without technical language, acronyms and terms of art that are unknown to the layperson. If such terms or language are used they should be explained. As appropriate, translate these materials to languages used by your community residents.

It is helpful to use multiple outreach and communication opportunities, including local government websites, appropriate media (including ethnic media), area organization and congregation communication channels, etc.

At public engagement events, the use of visuals (PowerPoints, charts, etc.) are particularly important to describe and clarify AB 109, key participating agencies and departments, realignment timelines and revenues, and the (anticipated) number and categories of individuals to be incarcerated and supervised locally.

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<sup>1</sup> Among these, see: <http://www.cdcr.ca.gov/realignment/index.html>; <http://calrealignment.org/>; <http://www.csac.counties.org/default.asp?id=3202>; <http://www.courts.ca.gov/partners/realignment.htm>.

For instance, if members of the Community Corrections Partnership are present, in addition to explaining the role and membership of the CCP and the CCP Executive Committee, have the individual members explain their respective local agency offices and roles generally and in relation to realignment.

**6. Consider Your Realignment Message.** In addition to the more specific plans about the new local role in probation and incarceration, public engagement organizers may wish to think ahead about the overarching “messages” that may be transmitted by local officials through the planned public engagement meetings or other activities. Such “messages” may be intended or not.

There are a variety of these larger “meta-messages” or overarching ideas about public safety realignment that the public may take away from a meeting on the subject. These may include:

- The new opportunities for local control, innovation and recidivism reduction;
- Possible threats to the community’s public safety (including possible secondary effects of realignment such as jail overcrowding);
- The difficulties of working with the state or other jurisdictions on specific local community corrections plans and services;
- Other states’ and/or jurisdictions’ experiences with community corrections; and
- The challenges of creating effective community corrections plans and systems given the short timeframes, limited and uncertain funding, and/or the complexity of managing change in such a continually evolving environment.

It is up to each Community Corrections Partnership or local agency that is planning a public engagement activity to determine what information to provide and what message or messages it wishes to convey. The key is to prevent messages you **don't** want from overwhelming the messages that you **do** want people to walk away with. For example, you can give factual information about implementation challenges without creating the impression that realignment success is unlikely. Care to ensure clarity and accuracy about present and future realignment funding is particularly important.

**7. Make Public Engagement Accessible.** Identify accessible and welcoming public meeting locations for potential participants. These may include public schools or community centers and other sites, as well as local government facilities. What sites will help you meet your participation goals? In scheduling meeting times, consider work, family, cultural and religious obligations. As appropriate, provide language translation and translated materials, as well as onsite childcare and refreshments.

**8. Have a Longer-Term Public Engagement Plan.** Initial public safety realignment plans may be conditional or of limited duration due to: a) the uncertainty

about the numbers of new individuals to be managed locally or referred to county supervision upon release from state prison; and b) counties' needs to develop both the capacity and infrastructure for a range of community corrections services and programs. For most plans there will need to be modifications or updates, and additional plans will need to be made for the second year.

Given the need for changing plans, and for new plans over time, public engagement planners should provide the information available about any likely longer-term planning efforts and the entity or entities that will have responsibilities for plan review and adaptation. They should also describe the anticipated opportunities for further public engagement into these review or planning processes. Of course knowledge about future planning may only be rudimentary, but share what you know.

**9. Describe What Happens Next.** It is helpful to let meeting attendees know how their views or recommendations will be considered in final realignment planning and decision making. Also, let attendees know what happens next in terms of realignment planning and implementation, and what if any information they will subsequently receive. It is also important to maintain a list of those participating in these public engagement meetings (or who otherwise identify themselves as interested). They can then be kept abreast of realignment progress and activities generally and invited to later public engagement opportunities.

**10. Express Appreciation.** At public engagement meetings, or for any input received, let participants/respondents know that their attendance, questions and/or comments are appreciated and valued.

**11. Evaluate.** For any public engagement meeting or activity provide an opportunity for participants to assess their experience and offer feedback, preferably with written comments. Public engagement planners should collectively debrief after any public engagement meeting to review evaluative comments, assess the success in meeting public engagement goals, and to discuss and document lessons for future public engagement efforts. (See the Institute for Local Government's *Measuring the Success of Local Public Engagement* [www.ca-ilg.org/MeasuringPESuccess](http://www.ca-ilg.org/MeasuringPESuccess).)

This tip sheet is a service of the Institute for Local Government (ILG) whose mission is to promote good government at the local level with practical, impartial, and easy-to-use resources for California communities. ILG is the nonprofit 501(c)(3) research and education affiliate of the League of California Cities and the California State Association of Counties. For more information and to access the Institute's resources on public engagement, visit [www.ca-ilg.org/engagement](http://www.ca-ilg.org/engagement). To access this resource directly, go to [www.ca-ilg.org/PublicEngagementRealignment](http://www.ca-ilg.org/PublicEngagementRealignment). We are grateful to the Rosenberg Foundation for their support of this publication.

The Institute welcomes feedback on this resource:

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