



# Conservation District Board Member Recruitment and Community Outreach Guide December 2003

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## I. The Importance of Community Outreach

Community outreach is at the heart of building a strong and responsive district program that provides the best possible customer service to the people in your community. An inclusive district board will reflect the ideas and culture of the entire community and allow all to share ideas and feel comfortable coming to the conservation district for assistance. Achieving an effective and inclusive community outreach program does not happen overnight. It takes time, energy and commitment to build a strong and effective district board. Your efforts to include a broad range of community interests should not be driven by outside expectations but instead an internal desire to see all of the people of your community served.

This purpose of the materials contained herein, which updates and expands upon NACD's 1994 publication, *Reaching Out to Minority Farmers*, is to provide tools and techniques for extending conservation programs to all within the district community. There are also included recommendations for building productive working relationships with all groups served by the district. A board that welcomes and reflects the entire community not only increases conservation on the landscape, but also builds a strong and effective locally led conservation program.

### **The American Population: A Changing Panorama<sup>2</sup>**

The United States has witnessed significant demographic changes in both urban and rural areas in recent times. Between 1990 and 2000, the US population grew to more than 281 million—an increase of nearly 33 million, the largest in any decade in American history. During that same decade, foreign immigration played a large and historically unprecedented role in contributing to the growth of the resident population of the US and the nation's civilian labor force. Between 1990 and 2000, the number of net new foreign immigrants arriving in the US reached 13.2 million, accounting for about 41 percent of the growth in the nation's resident population. During the same decade, new foreign immigrants contributed nearly one-half of the growth in the nation's resident civilian labor force—the number of persons 16 and older who were either working or actively looking for work.

### **Breakdown of the US Population**

According to Census 2000, approximately 211.5 million people, or 75 percent of the total population, are white, as defined in the inset on the right. An additional 5.5 million people reported white and at least one other race. Approximately 34.7 million people, or 12 percent of the total population, reported only black or African American. An additional 1.8 million people reported black or African American and at least one other race. Approximately 2.5 million people, or 0.9 percent of the total population, responded to Census

#### **Ethnic and Race categories in Census 2000**

Spanish/Hispanic/Latino refers to an ethnic characteristic. People were asked a "yes or no" question regarding whether they are Spanish/Hispanic/Latino. Additionally, they could identify themselves as belonging to one or more racial categories.

"White" refers to people having origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa.

"Black or African American" refers to people having origins in any of the black racial groups of Africa.

"American Indian and Alaska Native" refers to people having origins in any of the original peoples of North and South America (including Central America), and who maintain tribal affiliation or community attachment.

"Asian" refers to people having origins in any of the original peoples of the Far East, Southeast Asia, or the Indian subcontinent.

"Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander" refers to people having origins in any of the original peoples of Hawaii, Guam, Samoa, or other Pacific Islands.

"Some other race" was included in Census 2000 for respondents who were unable to identify with the above categories. Respondents who provided write-in entries such as Moroccan, South African, Belizean, or a Hispanic origin (for example, Mexican, Puerto Rican, or Cuban) are included in the "Some Other Race" category.

<sup>2</sup> Source: US Census Bureau, *United States Census 2000, Census Brief 2000*

2000 that they were American Indian and Alaska Native only. Another 1.6 million people reported being a mix of American Indian and Alaska Native and at least one other race.

Approximately 10.2 million people, or 3.6 percent of the total population, reported being of Asian origin, with another 1.7 million saying they were Asian and at least one other race.

About 399,000 people, or 0.1 percent of the total population, reported being Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander exclusively. An additional 476,000 people reported Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander and at least one other race.

Approximately 15.4 million people, or about 5 percent of the total population, reported being some other race and 3.2 million more people reported some other race and at least one other race. The overwhelming majority—97 percent—of the 15.4 million people who reported some other race alone were Latino.

Census 2000 also found that 35.3 million residents, or about 13 percent of the population, reported being of Hispanic or Latino origin, terms that are used interchangeably in this text. For Census 2000 purposes, the federal government considered race and Hispanic origin to be two separate and distinct concepts. Hispanics may be of any race and that designation crosses all of the above categories. However, nearly half (48 percent) of Hispanics reported their race as white and 42 percent reported being some other race.

Although three-quarters of the American population is white, Census 2000 shows how diverse the nation has become in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. And with immigration continuing at record levels—for example, in 2000 Hispanics surpassed blacks as the nation's largest minority—that trend will likely continue. All this underscores the need to expand community outreach to ensure that conservation district boards and programs reflect the populations they serve.

### **The Gender Factor**

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Of the 281.4 million people who were counted in the US in Census 2000, 143.4 million, or about 51 percent, were female. While women have made great strides in leveling the playing field in the past few decades, their participation in government and business and industry still lags far behind that of men. That holds true in natural resource-related occupations, as well as others. For example, Census 2000 reported that out of the nearly 130 million employed civilians over 16 in the US only 0.3 percent of the women in that group were involved in farming, fishing and forestry occupations. Nearly four times that percentage in the same category were men.

### **The Urban Connection**

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More than 80 percent—nearly 226 million people—of the US population lives in metropolitan areas. The 276 metropolitan areas in the US grew by nearly 27 million people, accounting for nearly 85 percent of the population increase, between 1990 and 2000. This important component of the American population comprises by far the largest block of taxpayers and voters and, as would be expected, the largest political power base in the country.

The purpose of this discussion has been to present a snapshot of the US population—the community that conservation districts represent and serve. It's a community rich in diversity and resources. By tapping into that diversity and the resources it can bring to the table districts can

expand and strengthen their programs to meet the conservation challenges facing a growing and changing people in the US.

## **II. Reaching Out to Underserved Communities in the Population**

### **Disadvantages Faced by Minorities and Socially Disadvantaged Groups**

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In a 1996 statement on Program Delivery and Customer Service at USDA Agriculture Secretary Dan Glickman noted that the term *socially disadvantaged group* refers to "...groups whose members have been subjected to racial or ethnic prejudice because of their identity as members of a group, without regard to their individual qualities." A number of minorities, many of whom are recent immigrants, fall into this category.

Many minorities are handicapped by barriers that have resulted in low participation rates in conservation programs. This guide is not intended to be all-inclusive, but simply to discuss a few of the barriers, such as:

- limited resources;
- lack of educational opportunities;
- discrimination;
- limited English skills;
- differences in culture that inhibit communication;
- fear and distrust of government; and
- limited knowledge about conservation district, USDA and other programs and services.

**Limited Resources**—In a series of focus groups on behalf of the Rural Coalition, *Small, Limited Resource and Minority Farmers Discuss Conservation*<sup>3</sup>, participants identified barriers to achieving greater conservation and sustainability. For the most part, they were the same as the challenges to their farming operations in general. Participants identified lack of financial resources, restricted access to information, and disasters such as droughts, floods and market collapses for specialty crops as primary obstacles they face. Many of the participants criticized agribusiness firms and government agencies for developing a system that they believe favors large farms and corporations.

**Lack of Education**—Discrimination has led to educational disadvantages for many minorities and socially disadvantaged groups. Many have been denied access to formal education, or received a limited education—often because the community didn't have the resources to provide it. Many members of socially disadvantaged groups also struggle economically and are unable to pursue educational opportunities because of financial hardships. Many minority immigrant groups also face educational disadvantages because their countries origin may have offered them few possibilities for formal education.

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<sup>3</sup> *Small, Limited Resource and Minority Farmers Discuss Conservation, Analysis of Focus Groups*, Working Paper Number 1A, Program Responsiveness Series, John J. Green, Missouri Action Research Connection (MARC) Department of Rural Sociology, University of Missouri-Columbia on behalf of Rural Coalition/Coalición Rural Washington, DC December 2001

**Discrimination**—As the definition of socially disadvantaged groups states, members have been subjected to racial or ethnic prejudice because of their identity as members of a group, without regard to their individual qualities. Discrimination can create barriers to pursuing higher education and better employment opportunities.

**Differences in Language and Culture that Inhibit Communication**—When members of a group have poor educational backgrounds, written documents that require reading and writing skills can be intimidating, embarrassing and confusing. Written materials are seldom effective for conveying information in situations where the recipient has a limited educational background.

The dominant US culture relies heavily on the written word while many other cultures may emphasize oral and visual communication. Other cultural differences such as personal space, eye contact and different gestures can also inhibit or strain communications.

**Limited English Skills**—The large influx of immigrants in recent years has resulted in sizeable numbers of the US population for whom English is not their primary language. Breakdowns in communications arising from “English-as-a second-language” can create significant barriers to participation in conservation district programs.

**Fear and Distrust of Government**—Historically, many minority groups have been treated badly by the government—some by officials in the US and others by governments in the country from which they came. Harsh treatment can create distrust and fear of the government and authority figures in some minority communities.

That same distrust may also make it difficult for minority groups to accept and cooperate with districts and their partners. When approached by any government employee, a minority member may express alarm, doubt, or be coldly polite, especially if the employee is also a member of the majority culture. These feelings can cause minority individuals to be reluctant about adopting, or even listening to, conservation techniques.

We must keep these backgrounds and experiences in mind as we reach out to different communities. We may need to consider altering how we approach and interact with individuals from diverse communities. However, grouping people into categories such as these also can be misleading. We must be careful to avoid making broad assumptions about people based solely on appearances or ethnic or racial affiliation.

### **Cultural Differences for Marketing**

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Because differences exist between different communities, districts may need to change their approaches to marketing the district program to traditionally under-represented groups, including women and limited-resource farmers, ranchers and other individuals. It is important to understand differences among various cultures and even subgroups within cultures. For example, many individuals may not realize that<sup>4</sup>:

- Women tend to focus on relationship issues more than do men.
- Hispanics in general place a higher value on extended family relationships than do most majority culture whites.

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<sup>4</sup> *Managing Cultural Differences*, Daniel Dana, Ph.D. The Strauss Institute for Dispute Resolution, Pepperdine School of Law, December 2000

The first step toward understanding and learning to appreciate differences is building trusting relationships with members from different communities and developing reliable “contacts” within them. The following are some guidelines that can help you begin to do this:

- Find out where the members of the group get their information (churches, community groups, local community newspaper, etc.) and distribute your information through these outlets and media.
- Organize a team of local minority community members to advise you.
- Establish a local alliance/coalition and include other agencies, community, agricultural, conservation and civic groups.
- Share the stage with community leaders from diverse community groups.
- Ask one of the members from your “advisory team” to accompany you on field visits and demonstrations to increase your credibility among other members of the community and to build your advisor’s confidence in your intentions and honesty.
- Hold meetings in locations where minority community members are comfortable.
- Encourage new cooperators to identify their needs in their own language.
- Avoid using slang terms or agency jargon.
- Ask different minority community groups to establish goals, and try to connect these goals with the conservation agenda of your district.
- Establish special projects that foster a spirit of mutual aid and cooperation.
- Use visual and hands-on methods of educating and informing.
- When written communication is necessary, translate material into clear language written at a sixth grade level—the sixth grade level is standard for communicating with any group.

### **Alternative Ways to Communicate**

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If you are working with an individual for whom English is a second language, you may have to speak slowly and plainly. You should also avoid slang terms and other colloquial expressions. Remember, too, that sometimes people say they understand even when they don’t in order to avoid embarrassment or because they are trying to be polite – so don’t assume that someone understands just because they nod their head, or otherwise imply comprehension.

People who do not speak or read English fluently, or who have a limited education, may require that information be passed to them via different means. Consider alternatives to speaking or written documents to communicate your messages, especially for information and awareness-raising materials. Videos, demonstrations and verbal instruction in the native language of the group would probably get better results than written information such as mailed bulletins and newspaper articles. For example, purchasing and using a camcorder to videotape conservation techniques used by local groups is an excellent outreach technique.

#### **Alternatives to Written Information:**

- Videos
- Demonstrations
- Face-to-face verbal explanations
- Small group meetings
- Radio
- Word-of-mouth
- Photos
- Displays

Another effective technique is to ask respected leaders of different groups to learn about a program or practice first, and then let them communicate the information to others in the

community who trust and understand them. These leaders may also act as translators—both ways—for district customers who have a limited command of English.

### **Finding New Resources through Volunteers<sup>5</sup>**

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Through the use of a volunteer program you can increase involvement by under-served audiences that have not worked with the district before. By placing volunteer projects in communities where an underserved population resides, your district has the opportunity to work with groups of people that may have been missed by earlier efforts. If your district takes the time to start a project in an area that has not been served as well in previous efforts you may find yourself surprised by the number people in the underserved areas who hold the same values toward conservation as the district. As you work with volunteers from underserved areas, you may be surprised to see who develops into new community leaders.

Developing a diverse volunteer base can benefit your district in several ways:

- It increases the number of potential volunteers.
- Volunteers from backgrounds, communities and cultures can bring different—and often needed—skills to your district program.
- Volunteers from different groups may relate better to the communities you’re striving to serve.

### **Awareness for Current Staff and Volunteers**

As you recruit more types of volunteers, you may find that you need to raise the awareness of current staff and volunteers about cultural and other differences. It’s important to be open and honest and not fear discussing differences among people. Some may hold stereotypes about people from different cultures or economic classes. They may be afraid they will accidentally say or do something offensive to someone who is from a different culture or religious background. It’s okay to recognize differences and develop an appreciation for how these differences even help to bring success to your district program. The key is to always respect each individual as just that—an individual. You may find that someone from a different background may want to share their traditions and can help you use that knowledge to strengthen your outreach program.

A volunteer or associate board member program also allows people to see what your district is doing and begins to build “buy in” into your district programs. For example, your district can advertise for help with tree planting along a waterway in an underserved community. Those who come out to support and participate in the effort may take an interest in other district activities and programs.

### **Retention—Rewards and Recognition**

Almost everyone likes to be recognized and rewarded for their work. Sometimes this is the biggest motivation driving a volunteer to volunteer. But there are other reasons such as new learning opportunities and meeting new people. Some people may simply like the positive feeling of doing good things for others. The best way to find out what motivates a volunteer is to ask, and then reward them on that basis.

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<sup>5</sup> Adapted in part from: Lisa Hinley, *Volunteer Diversity, AmeriCorps\*VISTA Source*, Issue 3 (Winter, 1998).

When you do recognize a volunteer for their work, make sure you do it in their own community. For volunteers for whom English is a second language, recognizing them in your community's regular newspaper may not mean a lot. Doing it in *their* community newspaper or at an event in *their* community may be a much bigger deal.

Finally, remember that a group of volunteers, no matter how small or how large, could be the beginning of building a community volunteer support system that can become the next group of leaders in your district.

### **Conclusion**

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Ideas to increase community outreach are wide reaching, but it always comes back to the heart of the conservation movement – locally led. You are a local district reflecting local ideas. Reaching out to the entire community allows you to tap the resources of all of the wide range of thoughts, ideas, and talents from many different races, nationalities, genders and religions to be reflected in your locally led, locally made decisions.



### III. Process to Help You Recruit

#### Analyzing the Needs of Your District

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Before you begin to look for someone to serve as a district board member, your board should first identify what the needs of your district are for human resources. This is an opportunity for your board to expand the membership of the district and to find people that can help the district expand their program.

1. List major programs and activities of your district

|       |       |
|-------|-------|
| _____ | _____ |
| _____ | _____ |
| _____ | _____ |
| _____ | _____ |
| _____ | _____ |

2. What are the strengths and weaknesses of your district?

**Strengths**

**Weaknesses**

|       |       |
|-------|-------|
| _____ | _____ |
| _____ | _____ |
| _____ | _____ |
| _____ | _____ |
| _____ | _____ |

3. What programs and activities would you like to do but because of the lack of resources, human and other, have been unable to accomplish?

|       |       |
|-------|-------|
| _____ | _____ |
| _____ | _____ |
| _____ | _____ |
| _____ | _____ |
| _____ | _____ |

4. Identify types of people that have knowledge, experience or skills that can help you meet these accomplishments.

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5. List skills, abilities, knowledge, and experience provided by each current board member.

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6. Who does your district serve? List your clients.

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7. What new types of board members could help diversify your board, accomplish your mission, and better serve your clients?

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Board member recruitment of qualified and talented individuals requires looking beyond just your current circle of friends, relatives and business associates. It means actively seeking ideas and prospects from outside your inner circle. Local organizations that represent minorities and women should be invited to recommend a candidate based on your district's needs. Your local board should develop a list of potential groups, organizations and individuals to contact when recruiting a new member. **Some examples to consider include:**

- Community groups that represent minority cultures and women
- Conservation and environmental special interest groups
- People on boards of key organizations – banks, charities
- Advertising agencies and marketing firms
- Teachers and college professors
- Researchers and writers
- Accountants, bankers, and investment managers
- Timber harvesting contractors and professional foresters
- Horticulturists, nursery operators and tree farmers
- Farmers and ranchers
- Hobby and part time farmers
- Former legislators and public board members
- Retired local, state or federal employees
- Consumer activists
- Public relations professionals
- Geologists and engineers
- Professional fund-raisers
- Agronomists and soil scientists
- Economists and social scientists
- Urban interests

A recruitment prospectus (detailed in the next section) should be provided to each entity included on the list developed by your local board.

**Identifying Qualities and Qualifications of a District Board Member**

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Good district board members need to have a strong conservation ethic, skills and knowledge in conservation, as well as management skills and leadership abilities. Recruitment of potential board members begins with identifying the qualities needed and desired by the local community. District board members should be recruited on the basis of identified qualities and qualifications and not on the criteria of “who’s available that we know.”

**Some desirable qualities for district board members would include:**

- Open minded
- Strong leadership skills
- Innovative
- Likeable
- Professionalism
- Understands conservation issues
- Good speaking skills
- Progressive
- Always learning
- Fundraising abilities
- Personnel Management
- Legislative understanding skills
- Leadership network in the community

In addition to these, other qualifications to look for could include:

- § Individuals that can devote adequate time to the job. Some districts have a written policy dictating removal of a board member for a certain number of consecutive absences from board meetings.
- § Effective communication skills and the ability to get along well with other district board members, staff and assisting agency staff.
- § The ability to tolerate the inevitable criticism of leadership. An individual’s judgment and integrity are most important.
- § The ability to represent their own constituencies and avoid conflicts of interest.

What additional qualities do you want your district board members to have?

|       |       |
|-------|-------|
| _____ | _____ |
| _____ | _____ |
| _____ | _____ |
| _____ | _____ |

## **Recruitment Prospectus**

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In order to get people interested in becoming involved with your district, they need to know what the district does and the programs and services it offers. One way to inform prospective members is to develop a recruitment prospectus which may include:

- § Mission and vision statements
- § Your district's primary goals and objectives
- § Legal authority
- § Major issues
- § Major programs and activities
- § Funding sources
- § Expectations of district board members
- § Benefits of being a district board member

**Model Recruitment Prospectus and Standard Form**

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**Becoming a Board Member of \_\_\_\_\_ Conservation District**  
(name)

Concerned citizens in \_\_\_\_\_ County can help conserve natural resources by serving  
(name)  
on the \_\_\_\_\_ Conservation District Board. If the issues and programs stated in this  
(name)  
document interest you – please call \_\_\_\_\_ at \_\_\_\_\_.  
(name) (number)

**1. Mission:** (insert your district’s mission statement)

**2. Vision:** (insert your district’s vision statement)

**3. Goals and Objectives:**

- § Establish soil and water conservation policy for the district
- § Assess resource needs
- § Develop strategies to address these needs
- § Provide quality conservation education to county school children
- § Provide land users with technical assistance
- § Develop programs to address local natural resource problems
- § Serve as focal point for addressing natural resource issues and coordinating various programs to help identified concerns

**4. Legal Authority:**

\_\_\_\_\_ (conservation district enabling law number) of the Code of  
\_\_\_\_\_ (state name) defines a conservation district as a political  
subdivision of the \_\_\_\_\_ (state name)

**5. Major Issues at this Time:**

- § Water resources/water quality
- § Failing septic systems
- § Erosion from cropland
- § Erosion from construction sites
- § Land users needing technical assistance

**6. Major Programs and Activities**

- § Agricultural cost-share program
- § Conservation equipment program
- § Tree seedling sales
- § Publish quarterly newsletter
- § Approval of conservation plans
- § Review of county planning proposals
- § Educational programs for schools, youth, adult, and civic groups
- § Review erosion and sediment control plans.

**7. Funding Sources**

- § Local governments (board of supervisors, city councils, county departments...)
- § State government (department of conservation, conservation commission...)
- § Grants (district funding raising activities)
- § Federal grants, agreements...
- § District educational seminars and programs

**8. Expectations of Directors**

- § Take advantage of training opportunities to develop abilities
- § Attend board and committee meetings
- § Participate in district programs and activities
- § Serve as chair of one committee
- § Be involved & responsible for district program direction
- § Develop policies and programs
- § Promote soil & water conservation in the community
- § Help manage staff
- § Represent district in public
- § Help secure financial resources
- § Promote district

**9. Benefits of Being a Director:**

- § Being a voice for the citizens of your county/city
- § Self satisfaction of providing your time to improve the environment
- § Being actively involved with assistance and educational programs for citizens
- § Providing leadership in community resource conservation
- § Development of leadership skills

Additional information is available by calling the district office at \_\_\_\_\_  
or by contacting a current district board member.

**Recruitment Prospectus**

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**Mission:**

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**Vision:**

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**Goals & Objectives:**

---

**Legal Authority:**

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**Major Issues:**

- 1.
  - 2.
  - 3.
- 

**Major Programs & Activities:**

- 1.
  - 2.
  - 3.
- 

**Funding Sources:**

- 1.
  - 2.
  - 3.
- 

**District Board Member Expectations**

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**Benefits of Being a District Board Member:**

- 1.
  - 2.
  - 3.
  - 4.
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## Recruitment Strategies and Materials

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Once you have identified your district's needs, the qualities of good district board members and have developed a recruitment prospectus and job description, it is time to develop your recruitment strategy. Whether your district has a resignation/retirement, or an election, the following may be helpful in your recruiting efforts.

The sample strategies that follow are only the beginning of what your district can develop. There are advantages and disadvantages to each. Choose the ones that best suit your needs. Ongoing recruitment using a variety of strategies normally produces a greater number of potential nominees who represent more diverse skills, interests and backgrounds.

### Sample Strategies

**Assemble a Board Development Team:** An important first strategy would be to form a board development team charged with responsibility to examine board member needs including recruitment, orientation, and development of board members. The team should include representatives from underserved communities to help identify potential candidates in those communities. The board development team should be broader than a simple nominating committee.

**Develop a Referral Network:** Build a third-party referral system for recruitment by developing long-term relationships with minority and women-owned businesses and organizations that represent women and minority communities. These relationships can yield valuable contacts for potential board members that have qualifications needed on your district board.

**District Board Members Information Form:** A nomination form describing qualifications the district board has identified can be distributed to minority and women-owned businesses and organizations that represent women and minority communities.

**Letter to Organizations:** Direct correspondence to organizations that represent women and minority communities about potential nominees for district board member positions is an effective way to attract qualified individuals. The letter should include qualifications the board is looking for in potential nominees.

**Public Service Announcements:** Radio and television stations run free public service announcements for community organizations. In many areas of the country there are Spanish-language stations. Many educational channels feature alternative programming in a number of different languages.

**News Releases:** Another method of reaching a wide audience regarding a district board member vacancy is through news releases in newspaper, radio, television and other media that serve minority communities.

**Newspaper Advertisements:** Well written and attractive advertisements in newspapers that target underserved populations may help create interest in a district board member position.

**District Recruitment Brochure:** An effective way of informing potential candidates about district programs and activities, and about the powers and authorities of a district board member is through a well developed, clearly written information brochure. Create interest by distributing

the information brochure through women and minority-owned businesses and organizations that represent them.

**Recommendations from Staff and Cooperating Agencies:** Staff that have provided direct services to clients are a source of ideas for potential candidates that have qualifications being sought by a district board. Staff also have contacts throughout the community that may be different from the current board members' contacts

**Recruitment at Annual/Special Meetings:** Make a special point to advertise your annual and special meetings in the media discussed above that target women and underserved communities. Keep an attendance list at events to save the names and addresses of people who come.

**Job Description and Recruitment Prospectus Distribution:** Make sure you distribute your district board member recruitment prospectus and job women and minority-owned businesses and organizations that represent them.

**Personal Contacts:** Personal contacts with a variety of community and organization leaders by district board members can be an effective method to create a pool of candidates different from that of a current circle of friends and relatives. Efforts to personally contact organizations that represent women and minorities could pay off through the development of joint projects between your district and those organizations.