



National
Policing
Institute



Public Safety & Elections

A Guide for Law Enforcement

This report was written and designed in partnership between the National Policing Institute, States United Democracy Center, and 21st Century Policing Solutions.

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This document is part of a series entitled *Public Safety and Elections: A Guide for Law Enforcement*. The full report can be found [here](#).

Section 1: Training Officers to Successfully Protect Elections

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The best preparation for election season borrows tactics and techniques from how law enforcement already prepares for other major public safety events. In advance of election season, considered, context-specific training is key for both sworn officers and professional or non-sworn staff (e.g., call takers, dispatchers, public information officers, etc.). The right training can help officers and staff brush up on skills, knowledge, and authorities—like election-related laws—that may be used only infrequently. It can help them adapt their existing skills to the election context and internalize expectations for the election season. Training also helps officers adjust as voting and election administration methods evolve and voter intimidation tactics adapt to new contexts.

Proper training for election season is especially important because officers may lack experience working in elections—or even participating in them at all. Young officers may not have voted in an election before, let alone policed one. For example, one law enforcement leader reported that over eighty percent of her agency’s officers had been in the law enforcement profession for fewer than three years.

Here are some ways law enforcement leaders can set their personnel up for success during election season:

Educate officers on the election-related authorities they may need to enforce.

Develop or update training on election-related laws that officers and staff may need to know, understand, and enforce—like what “electioneering” is and where it is prohibited, what behavior constitutes voter intimidation, and more. Local election officials and state, city, or county attorneys may be excellent partners in this work, identifying the most relevant and up-to-date legal provisions law enforcement will need to know. Law enforcement leaders have found it effective to hold dedicated sessions covering these laws and to incorporate such training into roll calls in the weeks leading up to election season.

Law enforcement leaders experienced with elections recommend a pocket guide covering core election-related laws to provide officers with easy access to this information. Chief Shon Barnes of Madison, Wisconsin, provides officers with a simple card of “dos and don’ts” based on relevant local, state, and federal law. Local election officials can partner with law enforcement in developing these guides. These guides should include any local rules applying to scenarios officers might encounter, like openly carrying weapons near a polling location, electioneering zones, voter intimidation, or giving voters food, water, or election materials while they are in line.

They might also include a phone number officers can call for an immediate live consult if they have questions about applying relevant laws. The Committee for Safe and Secure Elections has generated [Pocket Guides](#) for most states that may provide a good starting place.

“The body won’t go where the mind hasn’t been first. Conversely, the body will go where the mind has already been.... You train officers so that when they are in live situations, they react appropriately and with the correct measure of restraint as to not impede the electoral process.”

— CHIEF CHRIS DAVIS
GREEN BAY POLICE DEPARTMENT
(WISCONSIN)

Know and communicate about laws concerning firearms at polling locations.

Train officers about laws governing firearms and other weapons at polling stations. The laws regarding weapons at polling places vary from state to state, and in some cases from poll site to poll site. For example, in some states, loitering with a firearm near a polling location may result in law enforcement action. Some polling places are in facilities that prohibit firearms, such as schools or university campuses. Officers should be trained in the applicable laws so they can enforce them without delay or confusion.

Voters and election officials should be urged to call 911 if they are concerned about an armed person near a polling station. *(For more on this, see Section 3: Conflict Management and De-Escalation).*

Conduct tabletop or other scenario-based exercises.

Tabletop exercises are a trusted and familiar way of preparing for many major public safety events. They can be incredibly useful in preparing for election season, including by helping to identify where personnel may need additional training. Ideally, election tabletop exercises will also include governmental partners with whom law enforcement anticipates collaborating and communicating during election season. Local elected officials, partner law enforcement agencies, county or city attorneys, mayoral staff, and other relevant inter-governmental or inter-departmental partners all may have valuable insights to contribute. *(For more on this, see Section 6: Tactical Considerations for Election Safety).*

IN PRACTICE: TABLETOP SUCCESS IN GREEN BAY

In Green Bay, Wisconsin, a cross-departmental tabletop exercise included election clerks, mayoral staff, and city attorneys, as well as Chief Chris Davis and members of his command staff. The group arrived at concrete, operational decisions, including how to re-route 911 calls to prioritize election-related calls for service; how to secure the path that ballots would take from poll sites to the central count facility; and how many individuals would need to be evacuated from central count in the event of a bomb threat or other significant emergency.

Help personnel understand election administration.

Officers will benefit from gaining greater familiarity with election administration, ideally even seeing it up close. Coordinating tours of polling locations or the central facility where ballots are counted for officers can help to demystify the election process, strengthen relationships between officers and election workers, and help officers understand their vital role in keeping elections safe and secure. For example, former Sheriff Paul Penzone of Maricopa County, Arizona, regularly took deputies to tour the county's ballot tabulation center. That way, deputies could hear directly from election officials and understand what they do and how they do it. This helped deputies feel confident in the election process and take ownership of protecting election staff, voters, and ballots. This type of hands-on experience also helps officers later identify false election-related information.

“It’s about people being able to vote in a safe and secure manner.... When I was a cop in Chicago, the biggest thing we dealt with was a person having a pamphlet too close to the polling place. We didn’t need to know election law. Things have changed.”

— CHARLES “CHUCK” RAMSEY
FORMER CHIEF, METROPOLITAN POLICE
DEPARTMENT (WASHINGTON, D.C.)
FORMER COMMISSIONER, PHILADELPHIA
POLICE DEPARTMENT (PENNSYLVANIA)

Some law enforcement agencies may be too large to arrange tours of election facilities for all officers. In that case, tours for first-line supervisors and officers and supervisors assigned to election-related locations may be an alternative.

Emphasize that personnel must leave their personal politics at home.

For law enforcement personnel on duty, elections are about public safety and not politics. Agency employees should know that their politics have no role in how they protect and serve. The community must trust that their law enforcement agency, and all its representatives, are not acting in a partisan manner when responding to any calls for service—especially if those calls are election-related. Training should make clear that the mission is to protect the community and enable all eligible voters to vote and have their ballots counted, regardless of who they’re voting for.

Law enforcement agencies receiving federal grants directly or indirectly may have employees who are subject to the Hatch Act and its restrictions on partisan political activities while on duty. The National Policing Institute (NPI) has developed a helpful primer for law enforcement on adhering to the [Hatch Act](#). Additionally, the agency should draw clear lines around what insignia and apparel personnel can wear, and what types of tattoos they may need to conceal while on duty. It should also set expectations around personnel’s use of personal social media accounts, and other off-duty behavior that might undermine the perception that the agency is nonpartisan—and therefore jeopardize its mission.

Know the local community and teach officers its history.

It’s vital that officers understand their community’s expectations and history around law enforcement’s role in elections. In some communities, uniformed law enforcement is not expected to be at polling places; in others, uniformed officers are barred from polling locations by law. In others still, uniformed law enforcement is routinely stationed at every polling place or required by law to be there. Training should help officers understand and uphold the law, local practice, and community expectations related to uniformed law enforcement at polling locations. In addition,

officers should understand why community expectations and local practice have evolved as they have. Many younger officers may not know, for example, that law enforcement was long used to prevent certain citizens from voting or to enforce Jim Crow voter suppression laws. This historical memory looms large for some community members, who now may feel uneasy about an unexpected law enforcement presence at polling locations. Teaching officers the community’s history will improve both community relations and the agency’s efficacy.

“Communities with a majority African American population want to exercise their rights to safe and secure elections; they may therefore welcome a police presence at the polls with the expectation that they be treated justly and fairly.”

— SHERIFF JERRY L. CLAYTON
WASHTENAW COUNTY (MICHIGAN)

Train personnel to identify and address false election information and AI-generated misinformation.

Incorrect information about elections spreads quickly online, and it will accelerate as the election approaches. False information can undermine the voting process, create or exacerbate safety risks, and harm election administration. For law enforcement, this can result in misallocation of resources, misunderstanding of election-related legal authorities, or other critical errors. Most personnel may not be able to proactively monitor or search for this information, but they may encounter it in the course of their duties. Provide all personnel with training about how to spot false election information, including deepfakes and other AI-generated material, and how to verify truthful information. Personnel should be encouraged to report false information, and agencies should plan how to collect these reports, share appropriately, and correct the message.

These resources from CISA and Aspen Digital may be helpful places to start: [Tactics of Disinformation](#) and [A.I. Election Risks](#).