



National  
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# 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 3: Conflict Management and De-Escalation

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Law enforcement officers handle confrontations and defuse dangerous situations every day, and election season is no different. Today's polarized political climate means election season is even more likely to heighten tensions. Officers may be required to make split-second decisions about how to address disruption, harassment, intimidation, or violence in the election context. They will need to do so without unnerving voters who may be anxious about the presence of law enforcement, while still protecting the First Amendment rights of demonstrators. It's a delicate balance. Training and refreshers on conflict management and de-escalation can help prepare officers and leadership to handle these challenging situations.

**Here are some recommendations for anticipating where conflict may arise during election season, equipping officers to address it, and helping election workers through it:**

### **Provide supplemental conflict management and de-escalation training, tailored to the election season.**

A first-time or refresher training building on community policing skills will provide helpful preparation in advance of election season. Ideally, law enforcement agencies should tailor training scenarios to election-related sensitivities, concerns, and risks. Challenging scenarios include armed persons at or near polling places, allegations of ballot tampering or other election fraud, poll observers demanding additional observation access, and protesters blocking access to polling locations, among others. Training should emphasize that officers are apolitical professionals who are there to protect public safety and constitutional rights, while treating everyone equally regardless of their politics. Officers should also be encouraged to utilize their skills in problem-solving, conflict management, and de-escalation to resolve disputes and establish rapport with aggrieved individuals or protesters.

In addition, these scenarios should clarify that officers need to understand local and state election laws and policies to make quick decisions and take the temperature down when conflict arises. They need to know the answers to questions such as: What are the rules governing whether police can appear at polling locations? Can body cameras be used in polling locations? Can voters bring weapons to polling locations? And many more. *(For more on this, see Section 1: Training Officers to Successfully Protect Elections).*

## Connect early with groups planning demonstrations.

One way to help de-escalation efforts is through an advanced understanding of what election-related demonstrations and gatherings may occur, and what issues and grievances demonstrators may be raising. Law enforcement leaders and first-line supervisors should reach out to groups that might be organizing protests or other gatherings to understand their plans and anticipate any potential counter-protests. Law enforcement can make sure that groups have obtained necessary permits; that they understand the content-neutral time, place, and manner restrictions that may apply; and that they hear other expectations and plans for event management, such as whether there will be “free speech zones.” (*For more on this, see Section 5: Demonstration Management*).

“It doesn’t matter whether you agree or disagree [politically]. Everyone agrees or disagrees with something. That’s not our role. Our role is to provide for safety and to make sure that we, as a country and as a people, have a right to say our opinion and cast our votes without fear of injury or retribution.”

— ROBERTO “TAZ” VILLASEÑOR  
FORMER CHIEF, TUCSON POLICE  
DEPARTMENT (ARIZONA)

## Staff strategically to maximize de-escalation coverage.

Consider who in the agency has the most expertise in de-escalation and related skills, such as negotiation and crisis management. Make sure they are placed where those skills are most likely to be needed. In many jurisdictions, places where ballots are received and counted (vote tabulation centers) may be at highest risk for tensions, protests, and confrontations.

## Teach the basics of conflict management to election workers.

While law enforcement has been trained to deal with tension and confrontation, election workers historically have not had such training. Whether employees or volunteers, the people who run elections may appreciate learning from their local law enforcement agency about how best to engage in key skills like situational awareness and de-escalation. Training for election workers may also reduce the need for law enforcement assistance.

## Additional Resources

This de-escalation toolkit, published by the States United Democracy Center, may be a helpful place to start in developing such training for election workers: [De-Escalation: A Toolkit for Election Officials](#).