



National
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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 4: Communication and Messaging

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If a local law enforcement agency explains what it’s doing to keep the election safe, the public will feel safer as they vote and have more confidence in their local agency to handle anything that may come up. Law enforcement can provide important and meaningful reassurance to their communities that eligible voters will be able to cast their ballots without harassment or interference, and that election officials will be able to count ballots without intimidation. They can offer their communities comfort by affirming that the law will be enforced to keep election locations secure and peaceful, and that allegations of election-related criminal activity will be investigated fairly.

In past decades, police generally did not play a very active role in elections. In the lifetime of most Americans, even the most hard-fought election cycles remained peaceful. In recent election cycles, however, the threat environment has intensified for election officials, voters, and polling places. With increased challenges to public safety during election season comes a greater need for law enforcement leaders to reassure people from all backgrounds and political affiliations that law enforcement is prepared to help keep elections safe. This core message needs to be shared both within the agency, and with interagency partners, key stakeholders, and the public, both before the election and reiterated throughout the election season.

Here are some recommendations for how law enforcement agencies can best communicate their public safety plans for the election season:

Communicate executive leadership’s expectations throughout the agency.

Executive leadership will undoubtedly be well-informed about agency plans for the election season. It’s critical that those expectations and protocols be passed along to the entire staff. Some jurisdictions use roll call as a time to train officers on their election season responsibilities, including constitutional protections they should be aware of, expectations for conflict management and de-escalation, important election-related laws, and contact

“Communicate. With everyone. With the folks who trust you, sure. But especially with the folks who don’t. In fact, that’s who you need to communicate with the most.”

— ASSISTANT CHIEF NICOLE WALDNER
MILWAUKEE POLICE DEPARTMENT
(WISCONSIN)

information for key offices like their local prosecutor. Leadership may also consider having commanders designate time to train officers under their command closer to the election and to offer refreshers throughout the election period. Whether at roll call or during separate, dedicated sessions, these trainings may also allow agency leadership to reaffirm the key values they want to see reflected throughout election season. Finally, there should be a way for officers to gain clarity and assistance as they work the election, so that they can receive quick guidance during an incident. This may take the form of an incident command center and a number to call the local prosecutor for legal advice. *(For more on this see Section 1: Training Officers to Successfully Protect Elections).*

Develop a detailed communications plan.

Communicating regularly with the public about how their local law enforcement agency protects public safety during election season can help maintain calm, order, and confidence.

A comprehensive public relations plan should:

- List all stakeholders (voters, election administrators, community groups, and county officials, for example) and the best ways to communicate with each;
- Provide a detailed calendar or timeline for disseminating information to ensure a regular tempo of communication with the public. Even quick, simple updates can help provide reassurance and a sense of stability;
- Detail how law enforcement agencies will communicate with the public quickly and accurately if critical incidents occur; and
- Adopt a method for using social media effectively—both proactively and during crises. Leaders across the country recognize that the public largely looks to social media for real-time updates from trusted leaders on critical incidents.

As with so much else, this plan need not reinvent the wheel. Communications plans developed for past large-scale events, such as major sports competitions, concerts, or parades, could be adapted to address the specificities and nuances of election season. Share the plan with key internal staff and external partners when it is finalized.

“We want to educate officers and communities about public safety and elections as early as possible. Otherwise, people will get their education from social media, which results in misinformation about their voting rights.”

—CAPTAIN STACIE SCHANER
TUCSON POLICE DEPARTMENT (ARIZONA)

Reassure the public that their local law enforcement will protect the electoral process.

Throughout the election season, from the beginning of early voting to the end of counting and the certification deadline—which in some states may be several weeks after Election Day—law enforcement leaders should emphasize that their agency will keep voters and election officials safe. They should also emphasize that the election process will be secure and carried out according to local laws. On Election Day, if not before, use local newspapers, TV, radio, and social media to share that the role of law enforcement is to make sure voters can cast their ballots without intimidation. Potential talking points in press conferences and conversations with reporters might focus on how:

- Voters must be free of harassment and intimidation as they prepare to vote;
- Law enforcement is impartial as to the outcome of the process and will remain so even if the local sheriff is on the ballot;
- Law enforcement will respond swiftly to any effort to impede eligible voters from casting ballots, stop the vote count, or harm election officials; and
- Potential election-related criminal violations will be investigated fairly and in accordance with the law.

Coordinate communications with election officials.

Law enforcement and election officials should reinforce each other's messages that the election will be orderly, safe, and secure. A regular tempo of unified communications from law enforcement and election officials can reassure the public and prevent rumors or false information from gaining traction. Law enforcement executives and election officials should keep in close touch with each other, ideally by text or cell phone. This routine contact will help identify potential concerns quickly, including rumors and falsehoods that may need to be corrected. *(For more on this, see Section 6: Tactical Considerations for Election Safety).*

Make constructive use of social media to communicate directly with the public.

Maintaining a presence on major platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, and X (formerly Twitter), can help agencies spot and respond to false information, which spreads rapidly on these services. Maintaining engagement with the local community online, including local leaders, will help agencies share accurate information about election safety and ensure it reaches the local community. As trusted sources of information, law enforcement leaders, local election officials, and other local leaders should proactively share accurate information about voting times, locations, and methods on social media. Social media may be an effective place to update voters on Election Day traffic, parking, or other logistical concerns to manage community expectations and assure the public that voting is safe and secure. Particularly during emergencies, the public has come to rely on social media for timely updates.

Set expectations about how the agency will manage demonstrations.

Law enforcement agencies should consider getting in touch with groups and organizations that have previously held demonstrations around elections, or that may be planning to do so during the upcoming election season, for a high-level briefing on some parts of the demonstration management plans. Law enforcement should share that their role is to protect individuals' First Amendment rights to assemble and express themselves, while also protecting protesters and public safety. Make clear that the First Amendment does not protect violence, unlawful conduct, or incitement to imminent violence or unlawful conduct. Ensure protesters know about permitting requirements, free speech zones, and electioneering zones, as well as law enforcement's plans around enforcing these rules to help reduce the number of incidents that may require intervention or arrest. *(For more on this see Section 5: Demonstration Management).*

Educate the press on relevant public safety plans.

Plan announcements, press availabilities, and regular communications that will go out from the agency's public information officer or other communications points of contact. Use these communications to brief reporters on the work being done to ensure election season goes forward safely. Agencies might consider inviting the press to relevant trainings, such as those on election law for agency staff or de-escalation training with election officials or invite them to join officers touring facilities to learn about ballot processing procedures. *(For more on this, see Section 1: Training Officers to Successfully Protect Elections).* Share with reporters any messages the agency has for would-be bad actors, such as warning them that threats against voters, election workers, and election officials will not be tolerated.

Consider how to best maintain orderly press access.

In some jurisdictions, individuals posing as journalists have gained unauthorized access to election-related briefings and election administration spaces and have disrupted important election-related communications to the public. Together with election officials, consider what process might help facilitate access for bona fide members of the media, while ensuring that election-related communication to the public remains unimpeded. *(For more on this, see Section 6: Tactical Considerations for Election Safety).*