



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 6: Tactical Considerations for Election Safety

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In many respects, elections are like other major events that require advance tactical planning, coordination, and communication. However, law enforcement agencies across the country tailor their tactical plans to the specific election context in some key ways.

**Here are some tactical considerations specific to elections that are helpful to consider:**

### Election officials are vital to public safety planning—and may need law enforcement support.

The people who administer elections hold significant institutional knowledge that will be helpful to tactical planning. For example, these officials may be able to share locations that have been pressure points in past elections, what types of election-related conflicts may arise, and what the community expects in terms of law enforcement presence at election locations. In addition, in recent years, election officials have been subjected to a growing volume of threats and harassment and may need their local law enforcement agency's help in keeping themselves, their families, and their staff safe. [According to the Brennan Center for Justice](#), nearly 40 percent of local election officials report being abused, harassed, or threatened for doing their jobs. For these reasons, they should be involved in planning.

### Credible threats against election officials warrant appropriate responses.

Threats against some election officials may be so numerous and so credible that they need significantly more security assistance from law enforcement.

Examples of this enhanced response may include:

- Registering officials' home and office addresses and cellphone numbers in emergency dispatch systems to ensure that first responders receive a location history or flags alongside any calls for service from these locations or numbers;
- Providing guidance to election officials and their staff about how best to document and report threats against themselves and others;
- Recommendations on installing alarms in election offices and/or election officials' homes

to allow for quicker notification to law enforcement;

- Training election officials' staff in executive protection, crisis response, active shooter scenarios, situational awareness, and reporting suspicious activity;
- Assistance with target-hardening of election officials' homes and offices, including by performing a security assessment of both locations and helping to implement any recommended improvements; and
- Escorts, protective details, or assistance with temporary relocation for election officials who have received serious and credible threats.

Given the current threat environment, prepare staff to take threats against election officials and staff seriously, and to respond quickly. In many cases, an investigation into a repeat threat source can further deter the behavior. Ongoing communication with the prosecutor's office can help agencies align on the types of threats for which the prosecutors may pursue charges. Federal, state, and

local prosecutors are more regularly charging people who seriously threaten election officials and government workers. Agencies should discuss available and relevant legal options with election officials who have been threatened, including emergency protective orders or restraining orders. For more on how law enforcement can help keep election officials safe, see States United Democracy Center's (SUDC) resource: [Threats to Election Officials: Informational Guide for Law](#)

“This threat environment is not normal, but it can become normal if we don't combat it effectively.”

— PAUL PENZONE  
FORMER SHERIFF, MARICOPA COUNTY  
(ARIZONA)

## Plan to protect polling locations.

Long before any ballots are cast, law enforcement agency staff should make sure they have a map of polling locations in their jurisdictions, including addresses, hours of operation, and key contact information for election workers at each location. Once in-person voting begins—which is before Election Day in some states—law enforcement needs to be aware of potential threats posed to facilities where voters cast ballots. These locations are often key community centers, sometimes including schools and churches. Election officials can help advise as to whether a uniformed law enforcement presence at polling locations would be both permissible under state laws and welcome by the community, and how to best allocate resources among polling locations. Consider how to ensure that election-related calls for service, including to 911, are prioritized during election season. In one Wisconsin city, law enforcement made sure election-related 911 calls would get top priority. The police department then dispatched two cars to the site of the incident, usually including a supervisor. Knowing the number and location of polling locations can help determine the appropriate staffing plan.

## Protect ballot drop boxes.

While many jurisdictions have used ballot drop boxes for years, their usage surged throughout the country during the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, in many jurisdictions, policing practices and community expectations around drop boxes may still be evolving. In recent election cycles, in some locations, armed individuals arrived and stayed for hours near drop boxes, purporting to guard them. As with traditional polling locations, officers should be prepared to prevent potential voter intimidation and protect voters' lawful access to drop box sites.

To prepare, officers should have a map of all drop box locations. Agencies may also consider conducting security assessments of those locations and sharing the results of those assessments with local election officials. For example, one sheriff requested that each drop box be within view of a security camera and that drop boxes not be placed in poorly lit environments. In some states—but not all—security considerations for ballot drop boxes are laid out in law. In addition, as with polling location security, election officials can offer helpful input on ballot drop box security plans, such as balancing security objectives with community expectations.

Equip officers with local rules and regulations related to electioneering (that is, disseminating campaign-related information) near polling places. Consider having plans for officers to conduct drive-by checks of drop box locations. Having officers stationed next to or in front of drop boxes is not recommended as their presence could unintentionally deter some voters, but regular observational checks on the drop boxes will help ensure they are protected.

## Respond with a lighter touch where voters are present.

Jurisdictions vary widely on whether law enforcement may be stationed at polling locations at all. Some jurisdictions require law enforcement presence, and others prohibit it as a matter of law or policy. In some jurisdictions, like Cobb County, Georgia, it's standard procedure for officers to be at voting stations. Voters expect them to be there. But in other jurisdictions, law enforcement has limited authority to be present at locations where voters are present. For example, under Pennsylvania state law, subject to some exceptions, police officers may not be within 100 feet of a polling place.

Regardless, in every jurisdiction, law enforcement must protect polling locations without maintaining so heavy a presence that some voters are deterred from voting. If officers are allowed in or near polling locations in a given jurisdiction, officers in plainclothes can be a helpful way to provide security without deterring voters. Election officials can offer helpful input on what the right level of law enforcement presence might be.

“If one person does not get to vote due to intimidation, that’s a violation of the Constitution.”

— CHAIRMAN SEAN SMOOT  
ILLINOIS LAW ENFORCEMENT TRAINING &  
STANDARDS BOARD

## Ensure the safe transfer of ballots.

Consider what role the agency will play to help ensure that ballots are securely moved from polling locations and drop boxes to a ballot counting facility (sometimes referred to as a vote tabulation center). Officers are already trained to protect the chain of custody for evidence, and that training might be particularly useful in this context. In some areas, law enforcement officers transport the ballots, while in others poll workers do. Officers may protect the ballot transfer with other protective assets such as vehicle escorts or additional means if needed. Law enforcement should discuss the full ballot transfer process with election officials to understand where their assistance might help reduce the threat of ballots being lost, destroyed, or intercepted.

## Protect vote-counting facilities.

All officers should understand their role in protecting the ballots themselves as well as the vote tabulation locations. Well before the election, law enforcement should conduct a security assessment at any vote counting facilities and identify potential opportunities for security enhancement.

Law enforcement should consider any disruptive activity at the vote tabulation location in recent cycles and assess risks to this site heading into the present election season. The threat environment may warrant protective actions such as keeping demonstrators and protesters farther from the facility, cordoning off parking areas near the facility, and allowing only authorized vehicles to enter the area.

Law enforcement should be sure to know whether voting or same-day registration is also occurring at ballot tabulation locations, as this should inform how visible law enforcement chooses to be at these sites. If voters or same-day registrants are absent, law enforcement can assume a more visible profile at the ballot tabulation location, if warranted by the threat environment. In some jurisdictions, however, ballot tabulation sites are also voting and same-day registration locations. At these sites, law enforcement should be careful to ensure that their level of visibility will not deter voters or same-day registrants. Election officials can help advise on past practice and community expectations around law enforcement presence.

Officers should be prepared to both manage conflict, (*for more on this, see Section 3: Conflict Management and De-Escalation*), and know laws relevant to vote tabulation locations, such as those governing poll observers.

## Consider how the agency will process and share threat information.

Election season is dynamic. Agencies may need to consider how election-related threat and incident information is reported (e.g., 911 and non-emergency and open-source channels), how the information is assessed and analyzed, and the processes for monitoring and sharing information with other agencies in the jurisdiction and region. What may appear to be an isolated incident may instead be a part of a coordinated threat or disruptive event. In addition, information and analysis produced by other agencies in the area may add significant value. State and local fusion centers and real-time crime centers can help source such information.

## Consider when and whether a more formal incident command structure is needed.

The preparatory steps described here assume a standard response mode of operation, but there may be situations when a more formalized command and control mode is beneficial. The National Incident Management System (NIMS) offers components that address command and control, emergency operations, and information management. These components are flexible and scalable to various types of incidents. Training and preparing leaders, supervisors, and officers to implement these components throughout election season is an essential planning and preparedness step for agencies. Implementing one or more of these components can be especially helpful for mutual aid events. The U.S. Department of Homeland Security's Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) offers no-cost training in NIMS and its components. More information can be found at: <https://training.fema.gov/nims>.

## Plan to assist election officials in ensuring orderly press access.

In some jurisdictions, law enforcement has helped election officials maintain orderly press access at key election administration sites. In the present era, it can be hard to distinguish between bona fide media members and bad actors intending to create a chaotic environment. If there is an official press credentialing process in the jurisdiction, agency personnel should know what an official press credential looks like. In some places, law enforcement agencies have stepped in to help protect against unauthorized access by unknown parties. Consider consulting with election officials to understand their needs concerning press access.

## Prepare the agency to respond to swatting.

Swatting incidents are increasing. They have been reported against polling locations, election administrators' and advocates' homes, universities, libraries, and other venues. Swatting incidents create problems for law enforcement agencies by diverting resources from genuine public safety priorities, and by increasing the likelihood of confusion or mistake. Ensure that emergency dispatch has been educated on swatting and the signs of potential swatting attempts. Brief agency personnel on the potential for swatting and on agency practice when responding to calls for service. Ensure that intelligence channels are well coordinated so that the agency receives information on swatting attempts from other partners. For more on this, reference the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency's (CISA) resource: [Swatting Prevention and Response](#)

## Prepare to address unlawful paramilitary activity.

In recent election cycles, groups of armed individuals have tried to assume law enforcement functions, like "guarding" polling locations and vote count facilities. As a result, it is more important than ever for local law enforcement to understand their role in protecting voters, election officials, and the public in such instances. The Institute for Constitutional Advocacy and Protection (ICAP) at Georgetown University has created [fact sheets for all 50 states](#) explaining the laws barring unauthorized private militia groups and what to do if groups of armed individuals are near a polling place or voter registration drive.