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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 7: Officer and Staff Wellness During Election Season

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Preparing for a safe and secure election season means protecting the wellness of agency staff. This is not limited to the officers most directly exposed, but extends to non-sworn staff who also play critical roles: call-takers, dispatchers, analysts, and others. Election season will be a time to lean into—and if possible, augment—existing agency practices to prevent burnout and improve personnel wellness.

Research confirms what officers and law enforcement leaders have experienced: stress and burnout hurt job performance, exacerbate retention problems, and take a toll on personnel and their families. Elections may aggravate these longstanding issues. For one, the length of election season means added public safety demands sometimes spread over many months, creating a protracted period of additional stress and fatigue. In addition, law enforcement leaders worry about election season coming at a time when agencies are grappling with staffing shortages due to recruitment and retention challenges.

As a result, agencies may lengthen shifts, use more overtime, and limit time off, among other strategies, to manage the workload and maintain minimum staffing requirements. Add election-related responsibilities on top of this and it's a "perfect storm" for officer burn out, as one leader put it. Important attention, research, and writing has been dedicated to improving the wellness of law enforcement personnel, and many agencies have made great strides in adopting wellness practices.

This section offers law enforcement leaders' key observations about protecting their teams during election season and provides some additional resources.

### Leadership should communicate to personnel that election season asks a lot and that their wellness is a priority.

An agency commitment to health, wellness, and safety starts with leadership. As agencies plan for election season, leaders should make clear to employees that they recognize the potential for additional stress and should explain the steps the department will take to support personnel.

Consider identifying and sharing supplemental health and wellness resources (such as those linked below) in anticipation of election season, soliciting personnel input on how best to support their health and wellness, and enlisting personnel support in looking out for one another's physical and psychological well-being. For example, one law enforcement leader reported that her department has hired a health and wellness coordinator to create spaces for personnel to safely and openly address their stressors ahead of election season.

“We have proactively thought about officer wellness, which will be critical for election season. Creating a safe space for officers to voice their concerns and viewpoints improves morale, trust, and deepens relationships among colleagues. It also helps officers remain neutral in the field because they already have an outlet.”

— CHIEF CELISA LEHEW  
CHAPEL HILL POLICE DEPARTMENT (NORTH CAROLINA)

### Account for the different experience levels of your personnel.

Many agencies have had significant turnover in the past few years, resulting in a younger and less experienced workforce in many places. These newer personnel may not have had to navigate the challenges of protecting public safety during high-profile events, let alone an election. *(For more on this, see Section 1: Training Officers to Successfully Protect Elections)*. For that matter, they may not have even voted in an election yet. At the same time, more experienced law enforcement personnel may not be used to the heightened threat environment of recent election seasons. All this means it’s even more important to communicate about the stress of election season and augment health and wellness protocol in advance.

### Embed wellness priorities in all layers of management, particularly during election season.

Encourage personnel to talk to each other about wellness and look out for one another. Law enforcement agencies should train first-line supervisors to recognize when their patrol officers are exhibiting signs that they may not be well. These include signs of chronic stress and depression like unreasonable irritability, unexpected sick days, and troubled sleep. Agencies should also establish a protocol and reaffirm an expectation for supervisors to check on their staff during prolonged or stressful assignments, which may increase during election season. Supervisors should also be prepared to review staff assignments and make sure officers have adequate support for difficult tasks like protest management, incidents of voter intimidation, and polling place conflict management, among others.

“How do we think about and prepare for wellness during an election season that lasts for months?”

— CAPTAIN STACIE SCHANER  
TUCSON POLICE DEPARTMENT (ARIZONA)

Remind personnel that remaining apolitical on the job is itself a health and wellness practice, and that wellness is mission essential.

Remind personnel that remaining steadfastly apolitical on the job and “leaving politics at home” helps protect officers’ jobs from becoming even more stressful than they already are by preventing political disagreements from entering the workplace. Emphasize too that officers’ wellness is essential to their ability to fulfill their mission, particularly during election season: overwhelmed officers may be vulnerable to negative influences that could cause them to abandon their values and training.

## Additional Resources

The U.S. Department of Justice’s Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA) has created an officer safety and wellness initiative, Preventing Violence Against Law Enforcement Officers and Ensuring Officer Resilience and Survivability (VALOR). It offers agency resources, in-person and online training, and tools that address topics such as peer support and intervention, resiliency initiative planning, suicide prevention, and the connection between wellness, safety, and community trust. The VALOR initiative can be found at [www.valorforblue.org](http://www.valorforblue.org).

The National Policing Institute (NPI) has published materials addressing officer wellness, including [Staying Healthy in the Fray: The Impact of Crowd Management on Officers in the Context of Civil Unrest](#) and [Staying Healthy in the Fray: Family Wellness Guide](#), both available online at [www.policinginstitute.org](http://www.policinginstitute.org).