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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](#).

Executive Summary

July 2024

Election season in the United States presents a unique public safety challenge for law enforcement: keeping voters, election officials, and the public safe, while also maintaining a welcoming environment for all voters. As law enforcement leadership looks ahead to the 2024 elections and beyond, field-tested adaptations of existing policies and practices can help them and their agencies meet this moment.

A safe operating environment is a baseline requirement for free and fair elections, the bedrock of American democracy. As outlined in this report, through careful preparation, thoughtful internal and external communication, and robust relationships, law enforcement leaders can be uniquely effective in protecting public safety throughout the election season for all members of their communities.

Background and Methodology

To help identify common challenges and successful strategies for protecting public safety during elections, the National Policing Institute (NPI), 21st Century Policing Solutions (21CP), and States United Democracy Center (SUDC) convened law enforcement leaders from across the country between October 2023 and February 2024. More than 60 law enforcement leaders from local, state, and federal law enforcement agencies participated at these convenings, across 11 states and the District of Columbia, both in person across three different geographic regions and virtually. Participants shared their concerns about election season safety as well as their successes, and identified resource gaps. This report synthesizes those discussions to help other law enforcement leaders and public safety professionals prepare for election season.

Key Takeaways

Section 1: Training Officers to Successfully Protect Elections

- **Educate officers on the election-related authorities they may need to enforce.** Election officials and city/county attorneys can help prepare relevant materials.
- Every agency should **know and communicate about laws concerning firearms at polling locations**, which vary by location and jurisdiction.
- **Conduct tabletop or other scenario-based exercises.** Including election officials in these exercises can help crystallize opportunities to strengthen public safety.
- **Help personnel understand election administration.** Election officials can help provide an agency with opportunities to see up close how they do their work.

- **Emphasize that personnel must leave their politics at home.** Agency leaders should model and promote a commitment to apolitical policing.
- **Know the local community and teach officers its history.** Every agency should know their community's expectations and perceptions around seeing uniformed law enforcement at the polls, and the history behind this.
- **Train personnel to identify and address false election information and AI-generated misinformation.** Agency personnel should also know where to get verified election information.

Section 2: Interagency Collaboration and Mutual Aid

- **Identify resource gaps prior to election season.** This will help spot which mutual aid agreements will be particularly important.
- **Draft and update mutual aid agreements to reflect the jurisdiction's needs and anticipated incoming requests.** These agreements can memorialize what practices and resources are permitted where and clarify agencies' roles in different jurisdictions.
- **Interdepartmental training and scenario planning** can help agencies operationalize the contents of the written mutual aid agreements and prevent confusion and mistakes in the moment.

Section 3: Conflict Management and De-Escalation

- **Provide supplemental conflict management and de-escalation training, tailored to the election season.** Agencies should prepare to address election-related conflicts, like those concerning poll observation rules, ballot drop box procedures, and more.
- **Connect early with groups planning demonstrations** both to understand their plans and to communicate the agency's demonstration management approach.
- **Staff strategically to maximize de-escalation coverage.** Ensure that the personnel who are most skilled at conflict management are at the locations most likely to see conflict.
- **Teach the basics of conflict management to election workers.** Law enforcement's expertise on how to de-escalate and manage can really help individuals who work elections.

Section 4: Communication and Messaging

- **Communicate executive leadership's expectations throughout the agency.** An agency's success during election season starts with clear internal communication about the agency's mission and values.
- **Develop a detailed communications plan.** A steady and regular information flow during election season can help promote calm and order.
- **Reassure the public that law enforcement will protect the electoral process.** When the public hears the agency's plans for protecting public safety during election season, this helps to promote both trust in the agency and a feeling that participating in the election and casting ballots will be safe.

- **Coordinate communications with election officials**, to optimize both message content and timing.
- **Make constructive use of social media to communicate directly with the public.** Many communities now expect to hear from law enforcement over major social media platforms, particularly in times of major events or crises.
- **Set expectations about how the agency will manage demonstrations.** The agency's management of demonstrations will be better received if the plans are not a surprise.
- **Educate the press on relevant public safety plans.** Engagement with traditional media is key to helping keep the public informed.
- **Consider how to best maintain orderly press access.** Work with election officials to identify any past challenges and how best to keep information flowing.

Section 5: Demonstration Management

- **Set parameters and communicate about them in advance.** Share that the agency's job is to protect First Amendment rights, while also protecting public safety.
- **Seek out and engage assembly organizers and leaders.** Direct communication with these leaders can help align expectations and prevent mistakes either by demonstrators or the agency.
- **Maintain situational awareness and establish channels for information-sharing.** Advance notice of demonstrations happening in other jurisdictions will help the agency prepare.
- **Don't take sides.** Agency personnel should be vigilant in preventing any display of preference for one side of an issue or another.
- **Staff carefully for election season.** Heated demonstrations need personnel on the ground who are seasoned and expert at crowd and conflict management.
- **Build bridges to those participating in assemblies.** Sometimes, intermediary groups—like community and faith-based organizations—can help with this.
- **Prepare for potential violence and attempted violence by groups and individuals.** This includes separating protesters from counter-protesters and setting up designated free speech zones, among other tactics.
- **Be prepared for vehicular protests**, which have become more common.
- **Prepare the agency to manage protests beyond Election Day.** Election season may last for months before and past Election Day.

Section 6: Tactical Considerations for Election Safety

- **Elections officials are vital to public safety planning—and may need law enforcement support.** These officials have important information for law enforcement agencies and are increasingly under serious and continuous threat.
- **Credible threats against election officials warrant an appropriate response.** Such threats hurt election officials' ability to do their jobs.

- **Plan to protect polling locations.** Have a map of all voting locations, and keep in mind they are often in key community centers, such as schools and churches, which may be subject to special rules around firearms, electioneering, and more.
- **Protect ballot drop boxes.** Be sure to have a map of all drop box locations and consider how to prevent voter intimidation at these locations.
- **Respond with a lighter touch where voters are present.** Before deploying a visible law enforcement presence to a voting location, consider state and local law and practice, and how best to balance security needs with the goal of maintaining a welcoming environment for all voters. Election officials can help advise on how best to strike this balance.
- **Ensure the safe transfer of ballots.** In some areas, law enforcement officers transport the ballots, while in others, poll workers do. Know the role the agency traditionally plays and consult with election officials about whether the agency should help protect the route and transport of the ballots.
- **Protect vote-counting facilities.** Election officials may welcome law enforcement’s help conducting a security assessment of vote counting facilities and help with target-hardening. If voting does not occur at these facilities, law enforcement can assume a more visible presence, if warranted by the threat environment.
- **Consider how the agency will process and share threat information.** Federal, state, and local partners, as well as fusion centers and real-time crime centers can help augment intelligence sources.
- **Consider when and whether a more formal incident command structure is needed.** The National Incident Management System offers components that address command and control, emergency operations, and more.
- **Plan to assist election officials in ensuring orderly press access.** Consult with election officials in your jurisdiction to understand their needs concerning press access and how agency personnel may be able to help.
- **Prepare the agency to respond to swatting.** Ensure that emergency dispatch has been educated on swatting and the signs of potential swatting attempts.
- **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.

Section 7: Officer and Staff Wellness During Election Season

- **Leadership should communicate to personnel that election season asks a lot and that their wellness is a priority.** Consider identifying and sharing supplemental health and wellness resources in anticipation of election season.
- **Account for the different experience levels of personnel.** Many agencies across the country are very young. These personnel may not yet have voted in an election, let alone policed one. Tailor wellness resources to them.

- **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. Train first-line supervisors to address wellness with officers.
- **Remind personnel that remaining apolitical on the job is itself a health and wellness practice and that wellness is mission essential.** Remaining steadfastly apolitical helps prevent the added stress of political disagreements entering the workplace. Overwhelmed officers may be vulnerable to losing sight of their values and training.



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Introduction

July 2024

For democracy to function, voting must be safe and peaceful, and election officials must be able to do their jobs without fear or harassment. This is true in jurisdictions large and small, urban and rural, and of all political leanings. For law enforcement, the responsibility to protect public safety during elections is not about politics; it is about protecting public safety for all.

Law enforcement leaders have long understood this. But the work of protecting elections has become more challenging in recent years. Elections now cover an entire season: In many places, they begin weeks before Election Day and end weeks after, when counting and certification are complete. In recent election cycles, the threat environment has become more serious, too. Parts of the election process need closer protection than in years past, and law enforcement must constantly strike the balance between protecting public safety and safeguarding constitutional rights.

Given the gravity and stakes of this mission set, the National Policing Institute (NPI), 21st Century Policing Solutions (21CP), and the States United Democracy Center (SUDC) convened law enforcement leaders from across the country between October 2023 and February 2024 to help identify challenges and effective approaches to protecting public safety during elections. The convenings brought together more than 60 law enforcement leaders from local, state, and federal law enforcement agencies, across 11 states and the District of Columbia, both in person and virtually.

To start the day's conversations at each convening, Jim Burch, President of NPI, asked: "When you're thinking about protecting public safety during the 2024 election cycle: What keeps you up at night?"

It was a question with many possible answers, each with implications for training, tactics, planning, information-gathering, communications, partnerships with other law enforcement agencies, and the wellness of officers and staff. The leaders around the table—police chiefs, sheriffs, members of agency command staffs, and other federal and statewide law enforcement leaders—related lessons from past election cycles and other major public safety events. They spoke of how the challenges of election season have evolved and what may lie ahead. They raised questions, identified needs, and shared solutions and strategies that resonated with their colleagues.

"When you're thinking about protecting public safety during the 2024 election cycle: What keeps you up at night?"

– JIM BURCH
PRESIDENT, NATIONAL POLICING INSTITUTE

An essential theme emerged: Law enforcement agencies already have many of the policies, practices, and solutions they need to meet this moment. In general, agencies do not need to develop approaches from scratch; for the most part, they need only adapt existing practices to the election context. This adaptation process is continuous, particularly as the country grapples with a new era of political polarization and distrust in public institutions.

This report synthesizes the findings of these peer-to-peer discussions and brings in research and other promising practices to create actionable guidance for jurisdictions. The findings are broken into seven short modules by topic:

- **Section 1:** Training Officers to Successfully Protect Elections
- **Section 2:** Interagency Collaboration and Mutual Aid
- **Section 3:** Conflict Management and De-Escalation
- **Section 4:** Communication and Messaging
- **Section 5:** Demonstration Management
- **Section 6:** Tactical Considerations for Election Safety
- **Section 7:** Officer and Staff Wellness During Election Season

Law enforcement leaders will already be intimately familiar with these topics, but they may not yet be familiar with adapting them for election season. These strategies are not meant to suggest that one size fits all. On the contrary, the convenings illustrated how both election administration and policing vary widely across regions and localities. Both are shaped by state law, local ordinances, local procedures, and the expectations of the community. This report is also not intended to serve as an exhaustive guide to navigating public safety and elections. Nonetheless, by spotlighting proven strategies for applying trusted policing practices to this unique election climate, we hope to offer law enforcement leaders an opportunity to reflect on how best to provide public safety in their communities during election season.

We closed each convening with a question: “What are you taking home with you?” Each law enforcement leader around the table shared a concrete step they would take back or implement in their agency. We share many of those takeaways here. We hope this report gives you something to take home, too, as you prepare for a safe and secure election season.



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The National Policing Institute

The National Policing Institute (NPI) is an independent, nonpartisan, nonprofit research and policy organization with an unwavering commitment to addressing the complex challenges facing the policing profession through evidence-informed solutions and innovation. For more information, please visit www.policinginstitute.org.

States United Democracy Center

The States United Democracy Center (SUDC) is a nonpartisan organization advancing free, fair, and secure elections. SUDC connects state officials, law enforcement leaders, and pro-democracy partners across America with the tools and expertise they need to safeguard democracy.

For more information visit www.statesuniteddemocracy.org, email info@statesuniteddemocracy.org, or follow at [@statesunited](https://twitter.com/statesunited).

21st Century Policing Solutions

21st Century Policing Solutions (21CP) is a team of forward-thinking thought leaders on public safety that helps cities and communities tackle the challenges of delivering safe, effective, just, and constitutional public safety services. Learn more at www.21cpsolutions.com.

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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.)
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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](#).



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Section 2: Interagency Collaboration and Mutual Aid

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Like other large-scale events, election season may require agencies to respond to requests for or request supplemental law enforcement capacity from outside their jurisdictions. Whether it's a political candidate's visit, Election Day, or a key moment for certifying the election, a number of election season events may require agencies to respond to or make requests for additional resources. Many law enforcement agencies are accustomed to relying on their neighboring jurisdictions for extra officers or resources in emergencies and may already have plans memorializing these arrangements. But the lead-up to election season is a good opportunity to revisit and update mutual aid agreements, ensuring they are current, complete, and consistent with law, policy, and local practice. It is also a good time to review policies and standard procedures for both requesting and receiving requests for mutual aid.

Here are some additional field-tested recommendations for preparing for mutual aid during election season:

Identify resource gaps prior to election season.

As election season approaches, consider which election-related circumstances would exceed the agency's existing capacity. Consider also what other major events, such as a sporting event, convention, or concert, will occur during election season that will further draw upon the agency's resources. Ensure the requisite relationships with neighboring law enforcement and other local and state agencies have been developed in advance. Make sure response plans will fill any anticipated gaps.

Draft and update mutual aid agreements to reflect the jurisdiction's needs and anticipated incoming requests.

The approach of election season is a great time to ensure that:

- All mutual aid agreements are up to date with existing agency policies and applicable law;
- All agreements regarding support during emergencies are reflected in written mutual aid agreements, and that election events are specifically accounted for; and
- The mutual aid agreements comprise all potential requests for assistance and that all parties share a common understanding of terms and expectations.

These documents, in conjunction with training, are opportunities to ensure that any agency providing aid to another is clear about the chain of command and knows exactly what they can and cannot do in that jurisdiction, particularly when addressing demonstrations or unrest.

Jurisdictions have run into trouble when agencies providing mutual aid engage in practices that are prohibited in the host jurisdiction, potentially leading to escalation in the moment and liability afterward. Local officers—those who know the area, local rules, and the community—should be on the front line of any major actions and at the helm of key decision-making. Law enforcement leadership can help provide clarity about acceptable responses by making their mutual aid agreements as clear as possible as to what practices are permitted. The rules of engagement should ensure that the practices of the jurisdiction where officers are operating are respected while also ensuring that incoming officers do not violate their own rules.

“It’s important to look at every partner agency’s policies and procedures since our policies are not always in sync with one another. Our agencies need to be on the same page about security protocols, especially when it comes to anything that could be subject to an open records request. Every single policy needs to be merged for success.”

— ASSISTANT CHIEF SHUNTA BOSTON
SUN PRAIRIE POLICE DEPARTMENT

Important issues to discuss and resolve in advance may include:

- Command, control, and reporting structures;
- Communication methods, including all radio and data communication methods;
- Respective roles of the host agency (such as protest management) and aid-providing agencies (such as traffic enforcement);
- Resources and equipment to be provided by the host agency and aid-providing agencies respectively;
- Body camera policy that the host agency and aid-providing agencies will follow;
- Permissible protest management tactics;
- Permissible uses of force, reporting of force, and circumstances under which force may be used;
- Permissible and impermissible crowd control tactics and equipment; and
- Which on-scene commanders are authorized to direct tactics and employ particular equipment.

Consider holding interdepartmental training and scenario planning.

Once the rules of engagement are established and memorialized in a written agreement, consider having the host and aid-providing agencies train together to make sure everyone has practice implementing the rules. This can take the form of drills, simulations, meetings, or informal tabletop sessions to ensure that officers know what actions will be appropriate in different circumstances. At the very least, each agency that is a party to the agreement should review the terms of engagement with their personnel, taking care to point out any key restrictions for a given jurisdiction. Further, consider hosting a combined training with other agencies in advance of election season that addresses, among other topics:

- Command and control;
- Communication;
- Approved protest management tactics;
- Crowd control;
- Permissible uses of force;
- Use of chemical agents; and
- Support infrastructure.



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

July 2024

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](#).



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

July 2024

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).*



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Section 5: Demonstration Management

July 2024

Throughout the election cycle, law enforcement agencies will need to protect the public's constitutional right to assemble while ensuring that demonstrations don't veer into voter intimidation, public safety hazards, or violence. It's a challenging balance to strike. Fortunately, many law enforcement agencies already have sound plans and practices around managing assemblies, giving them a base to work from as elections approach.

Here are some recommendations for tailoring existing assembly and crowd management skills and plans to the election context:

Set parameters and communicate about them in advance.

Assembly leaders, organizers, and the public should know how the agency plans to manage assembly activity. Setting and sharing expectations for the range of acceptable and problematic behavior manages community expectations, helps to minimize negative contact with officers, and assists in keeping assemblies peaceful. Where possible, explain the reasoning for any firm rules. For example, let the public know if the reason a certain route is off limits to demonstrators is because it provides emergency access to a hospital. *(For more on this, see Section 4: Communication and Messaging).*

Seek out and engage assembly organizers and leaders.

Many agencies already have relationships with groups that are likely to organize election-related demonstrations; other law enforcement agencies should consider establishing those relationships. Meeting with these groups in person and in advance can help build trust and convey the agency's commitment to protecting public safety, constitutional rights, and access to polling places. These meetings can also help establish ground rules and mutual expectations. Some agencies work with groups to map out demonstration locations and routes, set timeframes, and share point-of-contact information for the groups and for law enforcement. The community groups may also inform their law enforcement contacts about counterprotests that they anticipate. Even groups or organizations that have expressed distrust or criticism of law enforcement may be open to outreach in support of public safety and may be key partners in keeping protests safe. Encourage organizers to designate a representative who can communicate with on-scene police commanders during events.

Maintain situational awareness and establish channels for information-sharing.

Personnel should stay abreast of current events and be aware of the local and national political landscape. Both monitoring current events and leveraging the agency's known resources are critical to anticipating and preparing for protest activity. Additionally, robust information-sharing with regional and federal partners may give an agency advance notice of critical problems like nationwide threats or individuals crossing state lines to disrupt elections. Consider establishing a process for exchanging information with the local fusion center, real-time crime centers, and neighboring law enforcement agencies, if such a process does not already exist.

Don't take sides.

Officers must remain apolitical in performing all their duties; that is especially important during demonstration and protest management. Instruct officers to treat protesters of all backgrounds equally regardless of where officers' personal sympathies or political beliefs fall. Caution officers against posing with or agreeing to be photographed with protesters. (*Note: This is separate from what each agency's local laws say about the public's right to videotape officers.*). Posed photos can easily be disseminated and cause friction between a department and its community members.

Remind officers of any existing agency social media policy, and that their social media posts may damage the perception of the officer or their actions, and the agency's reputation and efficacy.

To underscore the importance of remaining apolitical while on duty, election season is a great time to remind officers of the Hatch Act. The law bars certain political activities by many state and local law enforcement employees whose agencies receive federal funding, along with all federal employees. Additional guidance can be found in the National Policing Institute (NPI)'s resource: [The Hatch Act](#).

“This election will not be like other elections we’ve seen before. We must be prepared to show people we care. This is a critical time for America. I don’t share this as a partisan opinion, I say it as a concerned American.”

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

Staff carefully for election season.

Since election-related protests will be emotionally charged, consider where to send officers who are trained and skilled in protest and crowd management, de-escalation techniques, and hostage negotiations. These officers may be best equipped to take the lead in managing demonstrations, so they should be deployed thoughtfully. (*For more on this, see Section 3: Conflict Management and De-escalation*).

Build bridges to those participating in assemblies.

Faith and community leaders are often a bridge between community groups and trusted law enforcement leaders. As trusted advisors, faith-based communities and community organizations may be able to help facilitate conversations between local law enforcement agencies and groups planning demonstrations while also helping to minimize hazards to public safety.

Prepare for potential violence and attempted violence by groups and individuals.

An agency's best efforts to keep assemblies peaceful and to de-escalate confrontations may not be enough to prevent attempted violence. Consider which locations may need further heightened security. Where the threat environment warrants, consider what assets the agency can deploy, such as officers stationed outside of the ballot counting facility or messages that deliberately communicate to bad actors that any threats of or attempts at violence will be proactively monitored and investigated. At the same time, keep in mind that at locations where voters are present, a heavy and visible law enforcement presence could unintentionally deter voters from casting their ballots.

Be prepared for vehicular protests.

In several high-profile incidents in recent years, vehicles were used to engage in political intimidation and violence, such as by driving into protesters or targeting political campaign buses. Any protest management plan should address vehicular safety issues and threats, and the potential for vehicles to be used in menacing or violent ways. Agencies may consider erecting barriers between protesters and traffic. Officers should also be prepared to intervene if drivers are engaging in voter intimidation or using their vehicles to obstruct traffic to polling sites or vote count facilities.

For more information, see the following resource: [Managing Vehicular Protests During](#)

Prepare the agency to manage protests beyond Election Day.

Elections don't occur on a single day. They often cover an extended voting period, including multiple days of counting and verifying votes. This extends the window for potential election-related protest activity well beyond Election Day. In presidential elections, the calendar could stretch until the presidential transfer of power on January 20. Prepare the department for a lengthy election season and ensure there is sufficient staffing to cover it. Consider how the agency will protect the public, the voters, election officials, and officer wellness even as officers work long hours. *(For more on this, see Section 7: Officer and Staff Wellness During Election Season).*

Additional Resources

NPI has established an [After-Action Review \(AAR\) Library](#) that includes AARs featuring First Amendment assembly responses. These reports contain analysis and recommendations for responding to these events and other critical incidents.

Additional guidance can be found in NPI's publication: [Considerations for Protest Management During Elections](#).



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

July 2024

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.



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

July 2024

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.

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.