

Managing and Mitigating Threats & Harassment Against Local Election Officials

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Local election officials are on the front lines of our nation's democracy, seeking to serve the public good and our communities. While their roles and responsibilities vary between jurisdictions, they are public servants and share a broad responsibility to serve candidates, parties, and voters, all of whom demand timely and trustworthy election results.¹ In recent years, what was once a seemingly apolitical role has unfortunately been subjected to pressure by those that would seek to undermine the democratic process. This overt politicization has been detrimental not only to democracy, but to the people who are seeking to support our institutions, our history, and the sacred right to vote.

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This unprecedented shift in the way local election officials are viewed and the emergence of threats and harassment towards them remains underrecognized, though several studies have been published on the subject. This brief seeks to synthesize the findings and recommendations of those reports, focusing on the information most relevant to local election officials and local elected leaders. In addition, we have identified a set of recommendations for local election officials and created a list of external resources relevant to these actions. While we recognize the need for broad, structural change to address root causes – including extreme polarization, inadequate law enforcement response, and insufficient support for local election administration – this brief is intended to provide immediate and actionable short-term guidance to local officials. These recommendations apply both to election officials and to civic-minded citizens who volunteer to serve their communities as poll workers.

To fully comprehend the scope of the problem, our team conducted a series of one-on-one interviews with local election officials about their experiences with threats and harassment. We conducted additional research to add context to our understanding of this issue and identify best practices and resources for preventing and responding to threats and harassment.



Understanding the Issue

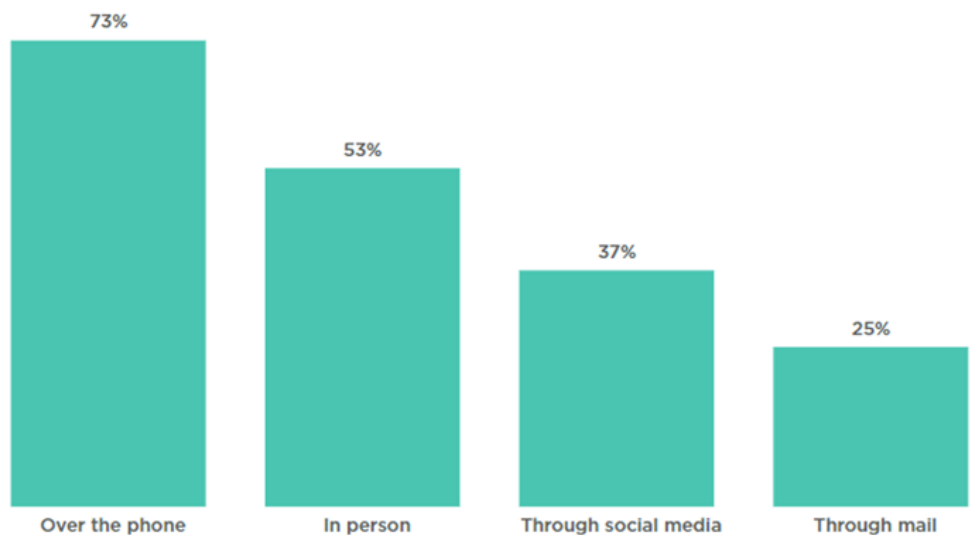
Targets of Harassment and Threats

A 2022 survey of nearly 600 local election officials by the Benenson Strategy Group and Brennan Center for Justice found that 1 in 6 local election officials has experienced threats related to their work. According to 77 percent of those surveyed, the number of threats has increased in recent years, and many are concerned for the safety of their colleagues and families.² In addition to explicit suggestions detailing violent scenarios, many of the messages sent to local officials included language or harassment aimed at the individual’s gender, race, religion, or other membership (or perceived membership) in a protected class.³

Local election officials experience threats and harassment in a variety of settings, including over the phone, in person, through social media, and through the mail.

How Have Local Election Official Been Threatened?

AMONG THE 17% OF LOCAL ELECTION OFFICIALS WHO HAVE BEEN THREATENED BECAUSE OF THEIR JOBS



Source: Benenson Strategy Group and Brennan Center for Justice

Other threats defy categorization. Chris Walker, County Clerk for Jackson County, OR, found a message painted in the parking lot outside her office: “If votes don’t work, next time we use bullets.”⁴ Bill Gates, Chairman of the Board of Supervisors of Maricopa County, AZ, received a set of orange prison jumpsuits in the mail, one for each member of the board.⁵

Causes

A combination of factors contributes to the growing trend of threats and harassment against local election workers. Two key factors have created the conditions in which Americans view and respond to election officials as though they are members of an opposition: Mis, dis, and malinformation (MDM) and increased partisanship and polarization.

MIS- DIS- AND MALINFORMATION (MDM)

Mis, dis and malinformation (MDM) are all types of false information varying in levels of malicious intent. The Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) collectively refers to them as “information activities” that can be used to create chaos, confusion, and division.⁶

- ◆ **Misinformation** is false information disseminated *without* malicious intent.
- ◆ **Disinformation** is false information disseminated *with the intent* to mislead, harm, or manipulate a target.
- ◆ **Malinformation** is information that is based on reality, *intentionally taken out of context* to inflict harm on a person, organization or country.⁷

Between November 3, 2020 (Election Day) and the January 20, 2021 inauguration of President Biden, “166 websites spread misinformation about voting, the ballot-counting process, and the results of the 2020 U.S. Election,” including false claims “that counting votes after Nov 3, 2020 was illegal, that Democrats stole the election from President Trump through widespread fraud, and that the U.S. military raided voting machine company servers in Europe.”⁸

The Benenson Group and Brennan Center survey found that 64 percent of local election officials believe that false information about elections is making their jobs more dangerous, and 95 percent place blame on social media. Most say that social media companies have not done enough to stop the spread

of false information.⁹ One Pew study found that “Americans who mainly get their news on social media are less likely to get facts right about the coronavirus and politics and more likely to hear some unproven claims.”¹⁰

Many of the threats made against elected officials contain overt references to false claims of election fraud. In a 2021 resolution, the National Association of Secretaries of State (NASS) noted, “based upon unrelenting misinformation and disinformation from both domestic and foreign sources, extremists have taken to threatening and endangering election workers, from Secretaries of State, state election directors, local election officials and election workers.”¹¹

Election Misinformation Leads to Threats and Harassment in Milwaukee, WI

In the pre-dawn hours of November 4th, 2020, Milwaukee Elections Director Claire Woodall-Vogg and other Milwaukee election officials finished counting 170,000 absentee ballots and were preparing to bring them to the Milwaukee County Election Commission. Ballot counting machines cannot connect to the Internet, so officials use individual flash drives to download vote tallies from each machine and physically take the drives from the counting location to the county commission office. Woodall-Vogg was on her way to the office with the flash drives and a police escort when she realized that one of the drives had not been removed from the machine.

Officials confirmed that in the roughly fifteen minutes between when Woodall-Vogg noticed the missing drive and the time it was delivered, no changes had been made to the data.¹² Nevertheless, conspiracy theorists seized on the story, claiming that Woodall-Vogg had used the flash drive to create a “ballot dump” of 120,000 ballots for Joe Biden, fueled by a right-wing outlet known for publishing unsubstantiated claims of election fraud.

Since then, Woodall-Vogg has experienced an onslaught of harassment and threats. She received emails and phone calls calling her a “traitor” and was told that she “belongs in Gitmo” and “should be hung.”¹³ She directly attributes her experiences of being harassed and threatened to the website making false claims about election fraud.

PARTISANSHIP AND POLARIZATION

Growing hyper-partisanship and polarization in recent years has contributed to increased distrust in election systems and, in turn, to harassment and threats against local election workers. Local election officials anticipate partisanship and polarization will increasingly interfere with their ability to carry out elections in the future.¹⁴

Whether elected or appointed,¹⁵ election officials are intended to be nonpartisan in the discharge of their duties. Despite this, election officials, like anyone, are susceptible to partisan incentives that put election integrity at risk. Following the 2020 election, many officials across the country were pressured to change or decertify election results. Since then, there has been a flood of candidates for offices overseeing elections at the state and local levels whose campaigns center on the false claim of election fraud. According to the *Los Angeles Times*, “the distrust of vote tallies and election workers” is becoming a key issue in local races.¹⁶

Effects

The growing trend of threats and harassment against election officials has made conducting elections harder for municipalities, increasing demand for security improvements and driving election officials and staff from office.

SECURITY CHALLENGES

In addition to facing security concerns for themselves and their workplaces, election officials’ families and homes have become targets. Intimidation tactics like doxing—the public release of personally identifiable information to harass or intimidate—have become a major concern. After being called out by then-President Trump, Philadelphia City Commissioner Al Schmidt told the Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the United States Capitol, “The threats became much more specific, much more graphic, and included not just me, by name, but included members of my family by name, their ages, address, pictures of our home—just every bit of detail you could imagine.”¹⁷ As a result, Schmidt required police protection in the days following the 2020 election, not only at the Convention Center, where votes were being counted, but at his home as well.¹⁸

While larger cities like Philadelphia may have the resources to provide security details to staff and update security infrastructure at election sites, many local governments lack the personnel and funding to adequately respond to all threats. Some election officials have taken steps on their own, such as installing bulletproof glass, wearing body armor, and carrying a firearm. Such measures reflect the significant frustration that officials have with the response to threats by law enforcement and the murky distinctions between free speech and credible threats.¹⁹

Compounding the matter, less than half of those who have received threats have reported threats to law enforcement.²⁰ Even threats that are reported are not consistently handled correctly or to the satisfaction and reassurance of officials. A 2021 Reuters investigation of more than 800 threats made to local election officials identified at least 100 that could warrant prosecution. Most were never fully investigated, which the report attributed to “America’s patchwork of state laws governing criminal threats, which provide varying levels of protection for free speech and make local officials in some states reluctant to prosecute such cases.”²¹

WORKFORCE REDUCTION

The increase in threats against elections officials has had a significant impact on job retention. Polling shows that 20 percent of election workers do not plan to continue in their jobs through the 2024 election cycle, and 30 percent say they know other local elections officials or election workers who have left their jobs at least in part due to safety concerns, threats, or intimidation. Many cite frustration with political leaders attacking a system they know to be fair and honest and unnecessary stress as motivating their decision.²²

Recruiting and retaining qualified candidates for election administration roles, as well as non-staff roles such as poll workers, also concerns local election officials. 60 percent believe that threats and intimidation will make it more difficult to retain or recruit election workers for future elections.²³ Chris Walker, County Clerk for Jackson County, OR, said that the anxiety she experienced following the 2020 election was “the first time after more than two decades [she] considered retirement.”²⁴

Responding to Threats

Local elected officials, municipal governments and elections officials themselves have several strategies available to alleviate the problem of threats and harassment, ensure that it is dealt with properly, and support election officials and their staff.

Security Preparedness

Local election officials should work with local law enforcement to provide protection and respond to threats, including establishing and maintaining an open line of communication as situations change. There should also be an open line with the appropriate offices of the District and/or United States Attorney and with the Department of Justice.

The need for security preparedness was highlighted during the attack on the United States Capitol on January 6th, 2021 when Senate aides, amid the evacuation of the chamber, ensured that the wooden boxes containing electoral votes were not left behind.²⁵ Facilities, including clerks' offices, poll sites, election equipment storage facilities, and ballot sorting and counting venues, should be assessed in advance to identify any security vulnerabilities. A comprehensive emergency plan should be in place to account for the safety of election officials, election workers and voters, as well as the security of ballots and voting equipment. While some localities have made active shooter drills a part of the planning process, such activities must be conducted only in concert with careful assessments of the potential impact on the mental health of staff. Tabletop scenarios—real-time emergency planning scenarios involving key stakeholders—have proved useful to election officials at the federal, state and local levels and represent a low-cost, high-impact, scalable solution.²⁶

Cybersecurity

Local election officials are often responsible for election technology, including inventorying, securing, and training staff on that technology. Capacity, both in terms of skill level and personnel, varies widely and local jurisdictions may share information technology resources with other agencies or rely on vendors for election infrastructure and technology.

Ensuring that users feel comfortable with technology and that voters have confidence in the security of the process serves both to safeguard the democratic process and limit disinformation. Even the appearance of vulnerability can feed into a culture of distrust, potentially dissuading voters from casting a ballot and adding to the burden of election officials responsible for fielding questions and concerns from the community.

The Center for Internet Security (CIS) has several mechanisms to facilitate rapid information-sharing around elections and cybersecurity: the Election Infrastructure Subsector Government Coordinating Council (EIS-GCC) and the Elections Infrastructure Information Sharing and Analysis Center (EI-ISAC). The EIS-GCC provides a forum for election security leaders from a range of government entities to coordinate efforts and works closely with their private-sector counterpart (EIS-CC) to produce, promote, and share election security information and resources. Local government entities, including municipal election offices, can also join the Multi-State Information Sharing Analysis Center (MS-ISAC), which is open to all state and local government organizations and allows information sharing and awareness of vulnerabilities.

De-escalation Training

Elections have the capacity to energize and excite people, but the high emotions that surround them can create the possibility of conflict. Increasingly, state and local elections administrators are turning to de-escalation training to ensure the safety and security of both voters and officials. While election workers and office staff are not responsible for acting as conflict resolution experts, the reality is that situations can arise unexpectedly and those who interact with community members should be equipped with basic tools for diffusing tension, if not resolving the problem itself.

A key component of de-escalation is providing clear guidelines, established in advance of any potential public interaction, to reduce the likelihood of exacerbating an incident and ensure consistency. Even in situations that do not rise to the level of harassment or threats of violence, principles of de-escalation can be valuable tools to build and maintain trust between voters and officials. Consistent approaches to conflict can also limit actual or perceived bias and prevent further erosion of trust between voters and officials.

Reporting Threats and Harassment

It is critically important for election officials to document incidents that are harassing or threatening, including retaining evidence such as screenshots of malicious comments on social media platforms or email. For incidents that occur in person or over the phone, recording the interaction may be difficult or unsafe. In such cases, individuals can still note details after the fact, such as time, location, and any specific threats, which should be done as soon as possible once the environment is safe.

In this way, election officials can build a record of incidents should future action be taken, identify repeat offenders (against the individual and election officials in general), and provide evidence should the harassment and threats necessitate legal intervention. As Dan Billings, Director of Security for the Pennsylvania Senate, advised during a webinar for the National Conference of State Legislatures, “Take all threats seriously. Sometimes we have folks that work for us that are just so good at diffusing people, they don’t think of it as a threat.” Documenting interactions, even those that are easily diffused, remains important, both to prevent a potential future interaction with a colleague less equipped to handle the situation and to have documentation should the threat level escalate.²⁷

The Election Assistance Commission provides guidelines on documenting threats.²⁸ Reporting templates and pipelines can make the process less stressful while ensuring that information is sent to the correct person or department and that all of the relevant information is included, and local law enforcement or legal agencies can be effective partners in setting expectations for reporting and for responding. The rise in threats against officials has led to the creation of several organizations dedicated to providing assistance, including the Election Official Legal Defense Network, which connects election officials to pro bono attorneys,²⁹ and the Department of Justice’s Election Threats Task Force, which recently approved the use of federal criminal justice grants to protect state and local election officials from abuse.³⁰

Countering Mis- Dis- and Malinformation (MDM)

The threat of MDM has reached new heights in recent years, fueled in part by social media, as well as by the change in election procedures forced by the COVID-19 pandemic. Both the complexity and the decentralized nature of elections have made it difficult for local officials to combat rumors, and it has become commonplace for angry, distressed, or confused voters to attribute nefarious motives to local officials whose role they do not fully understand.

Across and within municipal agencies, it is important to develop and maintain a clear communications strategy and set forth guidance on how municipal staff members should engage with the press, the public, and social media. Staff from different agencies should be able to answer basic questions, such as how a resident can register to vote or when early voting begins, which provides reassurance to members of the community. Municipal employees should also know where to direct residents for questions they cannot answer and have a point of contact with the local elections administration. Reference information, fact sheets, and lists of key contacts can be a valuable resource to ensure consistency and responsiveness.

Transparency can also be a vital tool in preventing suspicion or misunderstanding. Local media can play a role in illuminating the process for voters, speaking directly and specifically to a state's and locality's processes. Candidates themselves can either perpetuate or counter misinformation and first-time candidates can benefit from learning sessions or walkthroughs. Several jurisdictions have also extended invitations to the public to see for themselves how elections are run and created microsites to answer common questions, dispel myths, and showcase the steps they take to ensure the integrity of the election.

Prioritizing Support for Staff

Public service is not an easy job even in “normal” times and the decline in civility has taken a significant toll on election officials. Harassment and threats can have significant impacts on mental health and wellbeing. Providing election workers with information about stress reduction, counseling and other mental health treatment options available to them sends a clear message that mental health and safety is a priority.

During high-stress times, such as registration deadlines and election days, it becomes especially important for local government employees, officials, and agencies to support election officials and staff. During the 2020 election, some local government agencies reassigned staff to support election administration or offered municipal employees paid time off to work as poll workers. Many local governments participated in the first annual Election Hero Day, dedicated to thanking municipal election officials, election office staff, and poll workers. Several state-level commissions have sought out feedback and recommendations from election officials and poll workers about the challenges they face and improvements they would like to see made.

Cross-Agency Cooperation In Jackson County, OR

In Jackson County, Oregon, the Office of the County Clerk - Elections shares a building with the Community Justice Program, which provides Parole and Probation services to the county. During the final days of an election, the Community Justice Office limits appointments to scheduled reporting and instead focuses on serving as Election Ambassadors to the County Clerk - Elections office. County Corrections staff forego uniforms and jackets in favor of shirts bearing their agency name, guiding visitors to the correct location and taking shifts to monitor the building internally and externally as well as monitoring Official Ballot Drop Boxes at the location. “We have a good neighborly relationship,” says County Clerk Chris Walker about the Community Justice office.



Conclusion

The job of local election officials is foundational for the functioning of our democracy and America's election officials should not be subjected to corrosive political rhetoric or falsehoods. Election officials report feeling that they haven't received the support they need from federal, state and local government.³¹ The combined impact of the pandemic, social media harassment and growing polarization have forced election officials to develop expertise in public relations, cybersecurity, and public health. There is a resounding need for more action on the local, state and federal levels to support election workers.

Recent action at the federal level reflects a growing recognition that more must be done to support election officials working on the frontlines of our democracy. The launch of the Department of Justice's Election Threats Task Force signals an understanding that this problem cannot be ignored, but challenges facing election officials run deeper than that. More investment is needed to enhance cybersecurity protections, make improvements to election administration, and combat the rise of threats and harassment against election officials. Local governments play a key role in ensuring that election officials can serve as frontline workers in the democratic process.

Endnotes

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RESOURCES

SECURITY PREPAREDNESS

[Personal Security for Election Officials Checklist](#)
[Security Resources for the Election Infrastructure Subsector](#)

[Clearinghouse Resources for Election Officials](#)
Election Assistance Commission (EAC)

[Election Crimes and Security](#)
Federal Bureau of Investigation

[Preparing for Election Day and Post-Election Demonstrations: What Law Enforcement Should Do](#)

The Voter Protection Program, the Institute for Constitutional Advocacy and Protection at Georgetown Law, 21CP Solutions, and the Crime and Justice Institute

DE-ESCALATION TRAINING

[Guidelines for De-Escalation and Communication Around Contentious Meetings for Local Elected Officials](#)

[De-escalation Guidance for Poll Workers](#)
Bridging Divides Initiative

[Webinar: Deescalation Techniques for the Legislature](#)
National Conference of State Legislatures

[Election Season De-Escalation Tips](#)
Crisis Prevention Institute

[A De-Escalation Guide for Illinois Election Judges](#)
Illinois State Board of Elections

CYBERSECURITY

[Cyber Incident Checklist](#)

[Elections Infrastructure Information Sharing and Analysis Center \(EI-ISAC\)](#)

[Multi State Information Sharing Analysis Center \(MS-ISAC\)](#)

Center for Internet Security (CIS)

[The State and Local Election Cybersecurity Playbook](#)

[Election Cyber Incident Communications Coordination Guide](#)

[Election Cyber Incident Communications Plan Template](#)

Harvard Kennedy School Belfer Center

[Election Security Resource Library Election Cyber Tabletop In a Box](#)

Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA)

[Protecting Yourself from Doxing](#)

North Carolina State Board of Elections

[Voter Registration Database Security Report \(2020\)](#)

Center for Election Innovation and Research

COUNTERING MIS- DIS- AND MALINFORMATION

[Mis-, Dis-, and Malinformation Planning and Incident Response Guide for Election Officials](#)

[We're in This Together: Mis-, Dis-, and Malinformation Stops with You](#)

[Rumor Control Page Start-Up Guide](#)

Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA)

[US Elections Disinformation Tabletop Exercise Package](#)

Harvard University Berkman Klein Center for Internet & Society

[Defending Democracy: Protecting Election Officials from Digital Threats](#)

Security Positive and The Elections Project

REPORTING THREATS AND HARASSMENT

[Guidance Regarding Threats Against Election Workers](#)

[JAG Funding to Combat Threats Against Election Workers](#)

U.S. Department of Justice

[Defining "Online Abuse": A Glossary of Terms](#)

[Assessing Online Threats](#)

PEN America

[Election Official Legal Defense Network](#)

Center for Election Innovation and Research

[How to Report Bullying or Abuse on Social Media](#)

BulliesOut

PRIORITIZING SUPPORT FOR STAFF MEMBERS

[How Local Leaders Can Cultivate Mental Health Excellence in the Workplace](#)

National League of Cities

[Best Practices: Structured Peer Support Network](#)

International Press Institute (IPI)'s Ontheline Programme

[Advice from a Psychologist: Online Harassment Field Manual](#)

PEN America

[Election Hero Day Partner Toolkit](#)

Election Hero Day