

Issue Guide for Defusing Difficult Situations

During peak election season, tensions can sometimes rise, and election officials may encounter emotionally charged situations. Ensuring these situations are handled professionally and respectfully is essential to maintaining a safe and supportive atmosphere for everyone involved. This issue guide provides election officials with practical de-escalation techniques designed to defuse tense interactions, address voter concerns thoughtfully, and reinforce the integrity of the voting process. By applying these methods, officials can help create a positive experience for all voters, even in moments of heightened emotion or misunderstanding.

Overarching Themes

Every eligible voter is an integral part of the community at polling stations, and a respectful atmosphere is essential. In some polling locations, wearing campaign materials is not allowed to ensure a fair and neutral space for all. Election workers are there to support a smooth voting process.

It is important to maintain a respectful atmosphere at polling sites. Show respect for one another, whether waiting in line or interacting with election staff. By working together, everyone can create a positive and welcoming environment where people feel safe and valued as they exercise their right to vote.

Best Proactive Practices

Training before election day is essential for preparing election officials to handle the wide range of scenarios they may encounter. It provides them with a strong understanding of election operations, procedures, voter rights, and effective communication strategies, ensuring they can respond confidently and accurately to questions or challenges. Training also emphasizes the importance of impartiality and professionalism, reinforcing officials' ability to uphold the integrity of the voting process. With comprehensive preparation, officials are better equipped to create a positive and respectful environment for all voters on election day.

Consider adding these resources to your pre-election training for poll workers and keeping pocket books and signage at voting sites for quick reference:

- [De-Escalation Resources - Elections Group](#)
- [Employee Vigilance - Power of Hello - CISA](#)
- [De-Escalation: How You Can Help Defuse Potentially Violent Situations - CISA](#)
- [De-Escalation: A Toolkit for Election Officials - States United](#)
- [Problem Solving at the Polls - Power the Polls](#)

Best Practices During Active Scenarios

1. **Stay Calm and Patient:** Keep a calm demeanor, even if the voter is visibly upset. A calm attitude can help defuse emotional and intense situations.
2. **Listen Actively:** Allow the voter to express their concerns fully without interrupting, showing empathy and understanding for their feelings.

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Best Practices During Active Scenarios

3. **Acknowledge Concerns:** Validate their feelings by acknowledging their concerns, such as, "I understand this is important to you, and I'm here to help."
4. **Use Neutral Language:** Avoid using words that may seem accusatory or defensive, focusing on neutral and factual language.
5. **Provide Clear Information:** Address their questions or issues with straightforward information. If something is unclear to them, try explaining it in simpler terms.
6. **Offer Assistance:** If possible, guide them to someone who may have more specific knowledge about their issue, like a supervisor.
7. **Set Boundaries Respectfully:** If the conversation becomes aggressive, politely remind the voter that respectful communication is necessary and that you're there to assist within guidelines.
8. **Maintain Personal Space:** Ensure there's enough physical distance, which can help reduce tension and promote safety.
9. **Request Help if Needed:** If the situation escalates, calmly ask for assistance from security or other officials as per protocol.
10. **Express Appreciation:** Thank voters for their patience and cooperation, as positive reinforcement can improve the interaction tone.
11. **Find Solutions:** In most scenarios there is a way to help the voter without breaking the law or disturbing other voters. In the case of campaign material at a polling place, consider holding the voter's place in line while they return the materials to their car, or possibly issuing them a mail/absentee ballot that they can return at another time.
12. **Follow Established Protocol:** If the situation continues to escalate or becomes unmanageable, follow protocols established by leadership and law enforcement.

Best After-Incident Practices

1. **Document the Incident:** Record a brief, factual account of what happened, including the time, location, and any actions taken. Avoid personal opinions; focus on objective details.
 - a. Note the names of staff involved and any voter complaints or requests.
 - b. Ensure this record is securely stored as per protocol and made accessible to supervisors.
2. **Communicate with Other Polling Sites:** If the incident may affect nearby polling locations, inform other site supervisors to ensure they're prepared to respond similarly if needed.

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Best After-Incident Practices

- a. Use official channels to share this information (e.g., secure email or designated emergency communication systems), keeping communications professional and focused on potential operational impact.
3. **Debrief and Support Affected Poll Workers:** Hold a short debrief with any staff directly involved in or affected by the incident. Allow them to share their perspective and validate their experiences.
 - a. After extreme or heated situations consider reassigning the poll worker if they are uncomfortable continuing their duties, or even allowing them to take time off for their own health.
 - b. Provide mental health resources if available, such as access to a counselor or wellness programs, to help the poll worker process the event.
 - c. Offer additional guidance or training if needed to help staff feel more prepared for future challenging interactions.
4. **Review Protocols:** Following the incident, check whether de-escalation and communication protocols were followed effectively, identifying any areas for improvement.
 - a. Document these findings for potential inclusion in future training or procedural updates.

Draft Statements when Engaging with the Media

A sample generic script that can help you get started has been included in blue below. We encourage you to customize it based on the particulars of your jurisdiction.

Soundbite

"A hallmark of American democracy is the peaceful elections process where citizens make their voices heard not with violence but at the ballot box. It's a model and beacon to the world."

Statement

"Today, [INSERT TYPE OF DISRUPTION]. This caused [INSERT ANY IMPACTS TO VOTING OR PRECINCT].

Violence of any kind at precincts, election offices and against poll workers and fellow citizens is unacceptable and is a crime. We are committed to ensuring every eligible voter in [INSERT NAME OF JURISDICTION] can cast a ballot safely and securely without intimidation. The safety and security of ballots already cast by eligible voters [in that precinct/in those precincts] was never compromised by today's [INSERT INCIDENT].

We thank local law enforcement for their [Describe Response, for example, 'prompt/professional/thorough'] response and ask all individuals to respect the sanctity of the election process and our legal system. Every voter has the right to peacefully cast a private ballot for their candidates of choice without fear. That principle has served this country well for nearly two and a half centuries."