

## Issue Guide for Communicating Through Unexpected Challenges

Although local elections officials create extensive contingency plans to ensure issue-free, smooth elections, there are occasionally unexpected issues that arise or instances of human error in the process. Because of substantial planning and cross checks, issues are generally caught quickly and remediated without an impact on the integrity of the election.

But these issues may still get picked up in the broader media, and may contribute to false perceptions about fraud or mismanagement in the process. Communication can play a critical role in heading off misinformation, reiterating the security and accuracy of the process, and highlighting the ways in which the process is transparent to the public. This nonpartisan, generic guide offers communications best practices when navigating instances of human error or other unexpected problems.

### Quick Tips

- **Act Promptly:** Delay worsens uncertainty, and misinformation spreads.
- **Be Transparent:** Recognize what is known and what remains uncertain.
- **Acknowledge the Impact:** Understand and acknowledge the resulting concerns the public may have.
- **Outline Ways of Improvement.** Share how your office is enhancing processes moving forward.
- **Consistently Follow-Up:** Keep the media and voters informed as new information becomes available.
- **Update Procedures.** While information is still fresh, enhance protocols to minimize future issues.

### Communication Best Practices

The first priority is always to address the situation. The following communication best practices assume you have conducted an appropriate operational response to remediate, or prevent, further impact (i.e., new layer of security, enhanced procedures, etc).

1. **Assess the potential impact.** Find out the number of voters impacted, the extent of the problem, the time of the issue, the chain of events that led up to it. The more specific and detailed, the better. Have these numbers and details on hand.
2. **Coordinate communications with your team and local jurisdiction officials.** Ensure leadership is in the loop and aware of how they can act as validators and trust-builders. Engage with your local jurisdiction's attorney to ensure they weigh in.
3. **Prepare a statement.** You should cover the details of the issue, beyond just how the issue happened. Describe the ways in which the system worked - how the issue was flagged, addressed, and how the integrity of the election was preserved. Describe in detail the steps to address the issue moving forward (replacing equipment, reviewing standard operating procedures, auditing logs, etc.) and be transparent about any delays or after-effects.
4. **Choose primary communications channels.** You may decide that the most effective way to engage with the public is through your website, via a news conference with the media, directly via social media, or all of the above. The most likely scenario is a combination of channels.
5. **Be transparent.** Use the details you've prepared to address questions thoroughly, honestly, and with humility. Take ownership of the issue, as appropriate. If there is a question you don't know the answer to, name that it is still being assessed, and that you'll address it in follow up (with a timeline, if able to commit to one).
6. **Reiterate your core message, time and time again.** Highlight the ways in which the system worked as intended, that the issue was first identified, addressed, and the integrity of the election remains sound.
7. **Follow up as promised.** If there are pending or unresolved questions, circle back frequently until the situation is resolved.

## Sample Statements when Engaging with the Media

### Soundbite:

“In any election process, even with well-trained teams, thorough procedures, and extensive checks and balances, issues may still arise; and when they do, our priority is to address the issue swiftly and transparently. Rest assured that our office has contingency plans in place to identify and address these issues so that every eligible vote is accurately counted.”

### Statement:

“Ahead of each election, our team undergoes rigorous training, creates redundant systems, and establishes quality control measures to uphold the integrity of our elections from registration through certification, and every step in between.

*[Insert information about when the issue was identified and the nature of the issue, i.e. On Friday, our tabulation team identified an isolated batch of 400 ballots that had not been processed.]* Thanks to the robust checks and balances, we were able to identify *[insert issue details]* and successfully *[insert details about correction action taken to address the issue]*. At this time, *[insert current status, i.e. all eligible ballots have been properly counted and accounted for]*.

While this issue *[Insert impact, i.e. did not impact the integrity of the final election results]*, transparency and accuracy are at the core of what we do. *[Insert next steps and/or next scheduled update as applicable.]*”