

Issue Guide

Ballot Drop Box Emergencies

Safeguarding the security and integrity of ballots is critical to maintaining public trust and ensuring accurate results in any election. With the growing use of ballot drop boxes, or other sanctioned ballot collection devices, the risk of unforeseen incidents pose a unique challenge for local election officials. This nonpartisan guide offers best practices from around the country to help protect against emergency situations and, if confronted with an issue, to respond swiftly and effectively to mitigate its impact, uphold transparency, and reassure the public of the election office' commitment to a secure election process.

Best Practices to Ensure Drop Box Safety

1. Coordinate with local law enforcement to ensure they are aware of drop box locations and can respond quickly in the event of an emergency. Consider:
 - o Providing local law enforcement a list of your dropbox locations ahead of time.
 - o Asking a local contact to create a daily route to quickly check in on drop boxes throughout the day as needed.
2. Consider establishing and/or increasing proactive video surveillance monitoring of all drop boxes.
3. Increase ballot pickup frequency as you get closer to election day.
 - o A best practice of two or more pickups per day helps improve ballot processing times (and provides more time to notify affected voters of any deficiencies they may need to remedy if needed).
4. Track the number of ballots in the drop box at each pickup to determine if additional pickups are needed.
5. Ensure proper chain of custody (see [Strategies for Enhancing Ballot Drop Box Security](#) from The Elections Group).
6. Communicate ballot tracking options to voters frequently and across outlets (online, social, news briefings).
7. Contact your secure ballot box provider to discuss security options, best practices, and/or latest upgrades in the industry such as fire suppression technology, reinforcement, protective bollards, etc.
8. Educate key stakeholders, such as media, community groups, and general public, about ways your office:
 - o Protects their ballot upon receipt and how voters can protect their ballot while in their custody
 - i. Consider a brief update on homepage or mail ballot page, or on-hold wait messages
 - o Enhance security at ballot drop off locations (e.g. election offices, drop boxes, etc.)
 - i. i.e. these ballot receptacles are bolted to the ground, 24/7 cameras, regular police patrols, ballot pickups multiple times a day, multi-layers of physical security, etc.)
 - ii. Check with your legal team to ensure sharing specific details of your security plan do not conflict with exemptions from public record related to continuity of operations planning
9. Weave in these proactive measures along with all the other procedures that protect the administration of elections as you talk about these topics to key stakeholders in your community.

Best Practices When Responding to an Emergency

1. **Ensure Safety:** Contact emergency services right away to handle the situation. Do not approach the box without permission from emergency responders.
2. **Secure the Area:** Coordinate with first responders to secure the area around the drop box for the safety of bystanders, while ensuring access for emergency personnel.
3. **Document the Scene:** Take photographs or video, if safe, to document the extent of the damage for investigation and accountability purposes.
4. **Notify State and Local Election Authorities:** Notify local and state election authorities quickly to initiate an official review of protocols and official response.
5. **Communications Procedures:** Consider sharing the incident with neighboring jurisdiction(s) as details are gathered for general awareness and setup protocols to begin to notify potentially impacted voters.

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6. **Preserve Evidence:** Once the area is safe, preserve any charred or damaged ballots for forensic inspection or duplication, as permitted by law. Ensure proper chain of custody logs and documentation for all ballots.
7. **Evaluate Extent of Damage:** Assess if any ballots were recoverable and document the number of ballots potentially affected. Keep records of all salvageable ballots and ballots damaged beyond readability.
8. **Set up temporary, staffed drop-off:** At a safe distance from the scene to accept ballots as permitted by law.
9. **Inform the Public:** Communicate clearly and immediately to the public about the incident and steps being taken, including any recommended actions for voters who want to check in on the status of their ballot.
10. **Communicate Alternative Voting Options:** Utilize all available resources to inform voters about alternative, secure drop box locations and in-person ballot submission options. This includes updating websites, posting on social media, and most importantly, implementing ballot tracking systems.
11. **Support the Investigation:** If security cameras monitored the drop box, provide video recordings to law enforcement to help them in their investigation (may help determine what caused the incident).
12. **Implement Precautionary Measures:** Evaluate the design and placement of other drop boxes to improve resistance to tampering, reinforce the box, or relocate them to locations with better security or visibility if necessary.
13. **Report to Supervising Authorities:** Prepare a comprehensive incident report for supervising election bodies, documenting the event, responses taken, and recommending any protocol changes for future incidents.
14. **Update Procedures:** Utilize insights from the incident to enhance emergency protocols, training materials, and contingency plans for election personnel (and share with peers to see what other best practices apply).

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. Consider highlighting the importance of ballot security and maintaining confidence in the process; and remind all eligible voters how they may safely and securely exercise their right to vote.

On Learning about the Incident

Be as factual and forthcoming as possible about the incident to narrow down voter impact.

"We can confirm that an official ballot drop box [insert location details] was damaged in an isolated incident. We are working with local authorities investigating the incident. Voter security and ballot integrity are our top priorities, and we are currently assessing the impact on any ballots inside the drop box at the time. We will update the public as soon as more information becomes available, including any steps affected voters may need to take. In the meantime, [insert details about how voters can check on their ballot status or contact your office for support]."

On Attempts to Interfere with Ballots

Provide public acknowledgment that these incidents will not be tolerated and highlight inter-agency collaboration.

"We condemn any acts of harm that threaten our community's right to vote and the integrity of our election process. Acts like these are an attack on our American values and the rights of every voter in [INSERT JURISDICTION]. We are working closely with local law enforcement to ensure those responsible are held accountable. Our commitment to providing a secure and accessible voting process remains unwavering, and we will continue to take every step necessary to protect voters and their ballots."

On Inter-Agency Collaboration

Acknowledge the first responders helping your team navigate the incident.

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“We are grateful for the swift response and collaboration of local law enforcement, fire departments, and all first responders involved in addressing this incident. Their quick actions have been invaluable as we work together to protect our community’s right to vote. This inter-agency cooperation highlights our shared commitment to ensuring a safe, secure election process for every voter in [INSERT JURISDICTION].”

Preparing for Follow-Up Questions

If reporters ask follow-up questions, here are some additional details that may be helpful in illustrating the magnitude of the issue, your mitigation strategy, and ways to convey assurance and transparency to the public.

1. What happened to the ballots inside the drop box?

Provide available details about what you know at the current time.

“We’re currently working with our team and local law enforcement to assess any impact on ballots within the box and identify potentially affected voters. In the meantime, [insert details about how voters can check on their ballot status or contact your office for support].”

2. How many ballots were affected?

While this may be hard to determine initially, share what is known at the current time.

“We’re currently working to evaluate the number of ballots involved and will share that information as soon as we complete our assessment. What I can say at this time, [enter details of last pickup or other known details to help the public better understand if their ballot may have been impacted, for example: our last ballot pickup was at noon today, about 45 minutes the incident was reported].”

3. How will affected voters be notified?

Share how you will notify potentially impacted voters, and how voters with questions may reach your office.

“Our top priority is to ensure every eligible ballot is counted. Once we have a clear understanding of the scope, we’ll work to quickly inform affected voters by [insert details on how you may reach out to voters, for example by phone call, email, text, ballot tracking software, etc.]. In the meantime, [insert details about how voters can check on their ballot status or contact your office for support].”

4. What are you doing to ensure drop box security moving forward?

Outline publicly-available details about safety protocols and security enhancements moving forward.

“Security of our drop boxes is a top priority. We are working closely with local authorities to ensure this incident is fully addressed, and we’re reviewing our security measures to prevent similar incidents. As a precaution, we [insert details about what security measures are in place and if you are doing different; and if voters are able to return their completed ballot directly to an elections office].”

5. Can voters trust that their ballots are safe?

Assure voters on what you are doing to keep their ballot safe while it is in your custody, and what they can do to protect their ballot while it is in their possession.

“Absolutely. We take incidents like this very seriously and are taking immediate steps to reinforce our drop box security. Our goal is to maintain public trust in the integrity of the election process and ensure every eligible ballot is counted. For voters who still have their mail ballot in hand, consider [insert details on ways they may opt to return their ballot to your office safely and securely].”