

# De-Escalation: A Toolkit for Election Officials

In the past several years, there has been a significant uptick in efforts to interfere with election operations, before, during, and after Election Day. In this environment, elections administrators should be prepared to respond to such efforts, which can include demands for access to restricted spaces, threats of violence, and aggressive behavior by members of the public. These kinds of disruption have occurred at polls, counting facilities, and election officials' offices.

Planning and preparation before Election Day can help you and your staff protect the rights of voters and the public and resist efforts to disrupt your elections. This toolkit provides ideas and practical advice to help with that planning.

We know that many election offices don't have all the resources they need. You may not be able to carry out all of these steps. But taking even limited steps and adopting some of these recommendations will help your staff respond to attempts to disrupt the election.

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## What is de-escalation?

De-escalation is the use of communication or other techniques during an encounter to stabilize, slow, or reduce the intensity of a potentially violent situation.

## What are its goals?

The goal is to use purposeful actions, verbal communication, and body language to calm the situation.

## In This Toolkit

### Seven Steps to Developing a Plan for De-escalation

- [Step One: The basics: Before the election, think about when and where disruption may happen. Develop a plan for each likely scenario.](#)
- [Step Two: Know the laws and legal authorities in your area and set guidelines in advance.](#)
- [Step Three: Work with local law enforcement before Election Day.](#)
- [Step Four: Create a “designated responder” role to effectively respond to disruption.](#)
- [Step Five: Choose your designated responders by considering what makes a de-escalator effective.](#)
- [Step Six: Train your designated responders in effective de-escalation techniques.](#)
- [Step Seven: Train your entire staff and the public on election processes, rules, and standards.](#)

## Step One: Plan

**The basics: Before the election, think about when and where disruption may happen. Develop a plan for each likely scenario.**

- Identify the times and locations disruption might occur: Disruption can occur at any election site, including absentee ballot collection locations, voting precincts, election offices, counting locations, and the sites of audits, recounts, and logic and accuracy testing. Identify these locations and think about when they could be targeted.
- Consider what form disruption might take: Consider whether there are local individuals or groups that have indicated that they are likely to cause disruption. What tactics are disruptors likely to use?
- Identify potential resources: What tools and resources—such as de-escalation tactics, legal regulations, law enforcement, public education materials, or staff—are available?
- Talk to the people who have information that might help as you plan, including law enforcement and partners at election sites.
- Make a plan for each location relevant to your election, at each stage of the election.

### PLANNING FOR SUCCESS

- Think about the ways disruption might happen in your jurisdiction.
- Identify when and where disruption is likely.
- Familiarize yourself with the laws that apply to each location and stage of the election, including whether locations are open to members of the public and whether certain kinds of behavior are prohibited there.
- Contact local law enforcement to schedule a planning session.
- Develop rules and guidelines for responding to disruption. When should staff attempt to de-escalate, ask a disruptor to leave, or contact law enforcement?
- Identify staff members well-suited to deal with the public and train them in de-escalation tactics, local law, and your scenario plans.
- Educate your staff and law enforcement on relevant laws to ensure that they implement rules consistently and fairly.
- If permitted, plan to post rules and guidelines prominently in election locations (e.g., polling places, election officials' offices) to emphasize that the same rules apply to everyone regardless of party or affiliation.

## Step Two: Learn the Laws

### Know the laws and legal authorities in your area and set guidelines in advance.

- **Review local laws** and make sure you understand the legal rights and responsibilities of members of the public at each location and stage of the election.
  - Knowing the law and setting guidelines in advance will help you and your staff protect the rights of both voters and the public. In some places, this can be especially delicate. On one hand, many states protect the rights of members of the public to observe, and in some cases challenge, the conduct of the election. On the other hand, you must protect the rights of voters to cast their ballots without facing threats or intimidation, both of which are prohibited under federal and state law.
  - Most states have laws governing the rights and behavior of members of the public and, where relevant, election challengers.
    - Many attorneys general and secretaries of state have issued bulletins or guidance on this topic. Consider asking these offices for such guidance if your state does not have it.
    - [This guide from States United Democracy Center, Midterms 2022: The Poll Observer Landscape](#), is a helpful reference for the legal basics in many states.
- Many states also designate one or more election officials to deal with disruption at election locations. Check your local laws to determine the scope of your authority.
- Federal law and all states prohibit voter intimidation. Some intimidation may also violate laws relating to criminal threats.
  - [The “Actions Law Enforcement Can Take To Address and Prevent Voter Intimidation” guide](#) from Georgetown Law’s Institute for Constitutional Advocacy & Protection provides helpful background for law enforcement, and state-specific fact sheets are [also available](#).
- **Create guidelines ahead of time so staff members know when they can handle disruption and when it’s time to alert law enforcement.** Remember that voters may feel intimidated if they see uniformed law enforcement at the polls.

### WHAT COULD BE VOTER INTIMIDATION?

- Verbal threats of violence
- Confronting voters wearing military-style dress
- Brandishing or intimidatingly displaying firearms
- Disrupting lines or blocking entrances
- Aggressively approaching voters or their vehicles
- Following voters to, from, or within polling places
- Appearing to patrol or police the voting line while armed
- Directly and aggressively questioning a voter’s qualifications

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- You'll need to balance this concern against the need to make sure your staff and voters are safe. It's better to think ahead and give your staff guidance than to have them face these decisions in a stressful situation.
- Setting clear guidelines will help make sure you handle disruptions in a fair, legal, and effective way, regardless of the identity or political affiliation of the disruptor.
- Develop responses that staff can use if they encounter escalating disruption. Responses may include:
  - Intervention for de-escalation. De-escalation is the practice of slowing and/or stabilizing an interaction to reduce disruption or avoid unlawful or violent behavior. Properly trained staff may use de-escalation techniques where a disruptor has not broken any rules and does not appear to present a safety threat.
  - Asking the disruptor to move or leave the location. Staff should know when they should ask a disruptor to leave. These circumstances are often defined by state law and can include when de-escalation techniques or requests for a disruptor to stop certain behavior have failed.
  - Calling law enforcement. When there is a clear or imminent violation of law or safety threat and/or a disruptor refuses to leave, staff should call law enforcement immediately.
- Create guidance on what behaviors should trigger each response and who is responsible for implementing each response.
- Involve your county or municipal counsel as you work on these guidelines. They can provide guidance on the law applicable in your area and the scope of your authority. And if disruption happens and someone challenges your authority, it's best to have your lawyers prepared.
- Consider making a "cheat sheet" of relevant rules and laws for staff, members of the public, and law enforcement.
- **Educate your staff and law enforcement about the relevant rules**, so that they are applied consistently, fairly, and equitably across election locations and stages. ([See Step Seven.](#))
- **Ahead of the election, make information about the rights of the public and voters available** to the media and your community.
  - If permitted, post this information prominently at election locations.

**Failure to consistently enforce rules against disruption can lead to voter intimidation—and keep people from exercising their freedom to vote.**

**A lack of clear rules and guidelines can lead to inconsistent or unfair enforcement. Adopting clear rules can protect the rights of voters and make sure enforcement is fair.**

## Step Three: Work with Law Enforcement

### Work with local law enforcement before Election Day.

- Elections are complex and require highly specialized knowledge, so it is important to talk to your local law enforcement officials before the election—especially if disruption is likely. Building relationships with law enforcement partners and establishing clear, mutual expectations for responding to election disruptions can significantly improve the response if disruption occurs.
- **Reach out to local law enforcement and request a main point of contact** who will be able to respond rapidly and effectively before, during, and after Election Day.
- When you've determined your law enforcement contact, conduct a briefing that covers:
  - Election processes, how the election will work, and what the relevant laws say.
  - Your plans for each stage and location and plans for disruption. Request feedback from law enforcement.
  - The need for election security before polls open and after they close, ensuring that law enforcement is aware of the range of locations that could be threatened.
    - Law enforcement may know that you need support on Election Day, but they may not know about the risks before and after. Similarly, law enforcement may be aware of risks to polling places but unaware of risks to counting locations, ballot transportation, audits, or other sensitive processes and locations.
  - Emphasize the importance of avoiding the appearance of surveillance or intimidation at polling places. The presence of uniformed officers or clashes between law enforcement and disruptors at election locations can make some voters feel intimidated and even drive people away from the polls. Plainclothes officers can, in some circumstances, help with this issue.
- **Encourage law enforcement to provide training** on situational awareness and safety protocols at election locations.
- **Establish a regular channel of timely, two-way communication** about false election information and threats to you or the election.
- **Consider meeting with your regional FBI elections crime coordinator** or "ECC." Although they are no substitute for relationships with local law enforcement, ECCs can monitor threats and provide useful services.

### ACTION ITEMS FOR COORDINATION WITH LAW ENFORCEMENT

- Request dedicated election resources.
- Discuss each relevant election process and location, laws that apply to members of the public and challengers, and your guidelines.
- Brainstorm potential scenarios and responses.
- Discuss the importance of law enforcement reducing the chilling effect that their presence may have at polling locations
- Establish two-way communication about false election information and threats.

## Step Four: Create a "Designated Responder" Role

### Create a "designated responder" to ensure your team can effectively respond to disruption.

As election disruption becomes more frequent, de-escalation and public education are more important than ever. Angry or disruptive people can be difficult to handle. Training on how to respond should be a core part of election planning, and an important duty of appropriate staff.

- **If possible, plan to designate a staff member trained in de-escalation and your disruption guidelines at each relevant location**—counting locations, precincts, the election official's office, or any other key location. In this guide, we'll call these people "designated responders."
  - Carefully choose your designated responders ([see Step Five](#)). De-escalation requires skill, preparation, and expertise—and the techniques can backfire if not properly applied. Election workers already have a lot to learn and may not all have the temperament or expertise to perform de-escalation.
- **Adjust team roles and responsibilities to ensure that designated responders aren't too distracted** with other parts of the job so that they can focus on de-escalation when necessary.
  - It's critical that election operations go on while your designated responder is dealing with a disruption, so the responder should not be the top election official.
  - It's more difficult for a designated responder to respond if they are stressed about other responsibilities, or if election operations are in danger. Disruption itself may be the goal. If de-escalation distracts from vital operations like logic and accuracy testing, resolving challenges, checking in voters, or closing the poll, the disruption has already worked.
- **Other staff shouldn't try to handle matters themselves.** Make it clear to all staff that your designated responders are responsible for intervening when disruption appears. Train them to bring in the designated responder if disruption happens ([see Step Seven](#)).
- If you have the resources, **consider designating a "communications expert" with minimal competing operational duties to be your designated responder.** This person could be in charge of educating and assisting voters and the public, including being a designated responder to disruptive members of the public
  - At a minimum, assign a back-up member of staff to handle your designated responder's other duties so that they can hand off duties if they need to deal with a disruptor.

### WHAT IF I DON'T HAVE THE STAFF TO DEDICATE SOMEONE ONLY TO RESPONDING TO THE PUBLIC?

- Select and train multiple designated responders who are prepared to respond when they are needed.
- Try to ensure that these duties are flexible in terms of timing.
- Try to provide these staff members with backup on their other duties.
- Choose experienced election workers who already have key skills and characteristics, and who are less likely to be affected by stress.
- Try to choose individuals who are well-respected in the community.
- Ensure that these individuals are trained on the law, rules, and de-escalation techniques.

## Step Five: Designate a Responder

### Choose your designated responders by considering what makes a de-escalator effective.

Research shows that effective de-escalation benefits from specific techniques and characteristics —and that people who try to de-escalate a situation without them may do more harm than good. That’s why it’s important to think carefully about who your designated responders should be.

When choosing a designated responder, think about these characteristics:

- Judgment is critical. **The person must be able to accurately assess the situation and respond appropriately**, including deciding whether to intervene and de-escalate, immediately remove the person causing the disruption, or contact law enforcement.
  - Good judgment keeps voters and election workers safe. It can also help avoid interference with the legitimate functions of poll observers and election challengers.
- **Projecting empathy, confidence, and genuine concern** is key to effective de-escalation.
  - The de-escalation method set out in this guide requires genuine listening and affirming. If you can make the disruptor feel understood, de-escalation is more likely to be effective. A goal is for the disruptor to realize that aggressive behavior isn’t necessary to resolve their concerns.
  - As a result, research identifies effective de-escalators as open, honest, supportive, self-aware, coherent, non-judgmental, and confident without appearing arrogant. They have a non-threatening, non-authoritarian manner.
- An effective de-escalator will **maintain the appearance of a calm environment**.
  - That’s also important to make sure voters aren’t intimidated or driven away by disruption.
  - This is another reason it’s important to designate someone who isn’t distracted by other critical responsibilities. Those distractions make it harder for everyone to remain calm.

### KEY FEATURES OF AN EFFECTIVE DE-ESCALATOR

- Trained in de-escalation
- Maintains calm
- Appears confident, but not authoritarian or arrogant
- Open and honest
- Understanding
- Listens and responds empathetically



## Step Six: Train Your Responders

### Part One: Train your designated responders in effective de-escalation techniques.

Advance preparation is key because de-escalation is difficult from a personal and practical perspective. De-escalation in elections can be difficult because there may be no satisfactory answers for disruptors. The CLARA Method (outlined below) is an important technique for staff to be trained in, but there are several types of training that staff should participate in to be adequately prepared for Election Day.

Honoring the law and the rights of voters will, in many circumstances, lead to an inability to accommodate a disruptor. However, simply telling a disruptor “no” is unlikely to effectively de-escalate a situation. Disruptors can also be extremely personally challenging, and maintaining calm in the face of a disruptive presence can be difficult. It is vital to plan the best response to likely objections in advance and have a plan that can help the responder remain calm and confident.

De-escalation isn't meant to resolve conflicts immediately! Responders should focus on slowing the conversation down and minimizing disruption to election operations.

- **Train your designated responders in CLARA** (Calm/Center, Listen, Affirm, Respond, Add) techniques, as described in the section below.
  - In conversation, it is usually most efficient to simply respond, instead of taking the time to center yourself, listen, and affirm the other speaker. But efficiency is not the goal of de-escalation. Instead, the goal is to stabilize, slow, and reduce the temperature of a conversation.
  - Emphasize the need to go through each step of CLARA. Responders should never jump straight to responding without first centering themselves and listening to and affirming the disruptor.
  - Responders can and should, of necessary, circle back to other steps.
    - If expressed in writing, successful CLARA could look more like “CLALALALACLALALALALALACRLALCRLALALALACRAA.”
- **Perform role-playing and scenario training with your designated responders** to prepare consistent responses to the most likely—and most difficult—scenarios. For example:
  - Demands for access to restricted areas
  - Demands for access to voting materials or machines
  - Individuals angry that they aren't in the poll book or angry that they must vote provisionally
  - Demands that a voter be barred from voting
  - Challenges to absentee ballot returns
  - Challenges to poll worker instructions to voters
  - Attempts to issue their own instructions to voters
  - Disagreements on what constitutes electioneering
  - Disagreements on where challengers or observers can or must remain
  - Individuals with guns at the polls
  - Unauthorized challenges to the verification of absentee ballots
  - Allegations of fraud

- **Plan team choreography within the polling place** to ensure that responders can effectively remove disruptors from high-impact areas.
  - The responses to each scenario will depend on your state law, your policies, and the details of the scenario. But planning will build important skills for those responding.
- **Provide designated responders with additional resources.**
  - The following pages include a sample pocket card describing when and how to deploy the technique; you may wish to customize or modify it and share it with your responder(s).
  - Consider an in-person or live training with a de-escalation expert.
  - Having each responder understand their own instincts can be key to effective de-escalation.
    - The [Thomas Kilmann model](#), a conflict resolution assessment that helps people understand their own behavior and correct for their weaknesses when responding to tough situations, is a good start to this process.
- **Equip your election locations and your designated responders with the necessary tools to support their response.**
  - If permitted, plan to post key rules at election locations, so that the responder and the disruptor can refer them together and confirm that responses are based on objective rules that apply to everyone.
  - Provide the rules and regulations to responders to study before the election.
  - You may also equip your responder with legislators' contact information, so that disruptors can contact them in connection with laws they think should change.

## Part Two: Understand the CLARA Method for effective de-escalation.

Effective de-escalation techniques and a clear understanding of a designated responders' goals are the core of successful de-escalation.

The CLARA Method, outlined on the next page, is one technique that can be used to address anyone who is causing a disruption at your election site. It offers a model for calm, empathetic listening and communication that can de-escalate a concerning situation.

### THE CLARA METHOD

**CALM → LISTEN → AFFIRM → RESPOND → ADD**

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- **CALM.** Responders should practice a range of techniques to find their steady center. A few possibilities are:
  - Box breathing: Three count inhale, hold for three counts, three count exhale, hold for three counts, and repeat.
  - Using tactile sensations to ground yourself in the moment: Making tiny fists with toes, deliberately feeling the inside of shoes, touching the hem of a shirt or edge of a pocket.
  - Taking control of your own internal tempo and the pace of the conversation by deliberately counting to three before responding. Maintain eye contact and a pleasant facial expression or look down to collect your thoughts, giving yourself three beats to respond.
- **LISTEN AND AFFIRM.** These steps are vital and should be repeated as many times as possible before moving on.
  - Responders should repeatedly listen and affirm, asking open-ended, simple questions to invite response and correction, then repeat the input they've received—for example, "I hear that your concern is..." Then, ask more questions if possible.
  - Responders should name the emotion they believe (or sense) is being expressed—for example, "I'm hearing that you are frustrated"—and give the disruptor a chance to correct. Again, invite response and correction.
    - This technique slows the conversation, reduces its intensity, and demonstrates that the responder is attempting to listen and understand.
    - Responders should spend as much time as possible exploring open-ended questions.
  - This is also a good time to gently move the disruptor away from crowds that might become agitated or involved and voters who might be intimidated.
- **RESPOND.** Only after questions and listening have been exhausted should the responder begin to respond. In responding, responders should try to maintain rapport—but also respond effectively.
  - If a disruptor is demanding something that isn't permitted—such as access to a restricted area, a non-provisional ballot that they aren't entitled to, or that a qualified voter be barred from voting—the responder can't provide what the disruptor wants.
    - But the responder also needs to be able to maintain rapport and a respectful tone with the disruptor to ensure the situation does not escalate.
  - The responder should emphasize that they are trying to help, and that they are simply enforcing rules that are in place to protect every qualified voter's right to vote.
  - If possible, as part of the response, the responder should calmly appeal to the shared values underlying the rules—for example, the importance of ballot secrecy and protecting everyone's freedom to vote.
  - The responder can also emphasize productive avenues for expressing complaints. For example, where available, responders may point disruptors to formal complaint processes maintained by your office or state officials.
    - When informing disruptors of legal restrictions, responders can emphasize that they are bound to the law but suggest that the disruptor can make their views known to their legislators.
  - To respond effectively and confidently, responders should be familiar with the rules and procedures and be able to refer to and communicate them clearly.
    - If they are posted on site, the responder and the disruptor can refer them together.
  - When discussing rules that must be enforced, responders should use consistent, direct, statement-based phrasing. If they need to repeat points, they should never escalate tone or body language.
- **ADD.** If appropriate, the responder should add additional resources for the disruptor to check out later. The responder may also make behavioral requests, if necessary, in a calm, non-judgmental way.

## Step Seven: Train Your Staff; Educate the Public

### Train your entire staff and the public on election processes, rules, and standards.

- Hold a training for your entire staff on your procedures and the rules of conduct.
- If permitted in your jurisdiction, post the rules prominently in all election locations to ensure that members of the public know that the rules apply equally to everyone. This also allows both staff and members of the public to easily refer to them.
- Train election workers who are not designated responders but may encounter the public on how they should deal with disruption.
  - While election workers should not generally take on the tricky task of implementing CLARA themselves, they should be trained to respond respectfully and patiently to a disruptor and quickly get them to the designated responder.
  - Election workers should also be trained to recognize safety risks or situations where law enforcement must be called immediately.

### **How should staff who are not designated responders respond to disruptive members of the public?**

**If there is no immediate safety threat, staff who are not designated responders should engage respectfully and calmly, being sure to listen and affirm.**

**They should respond by saying they will alert the designated responder, who they know will be happy to help with the individual's concerns.**

**For more information, contact your state election official.**

Additional resources can be found here:

- [CISA Guide to Election Security – Physical Security of Voting Locations and Election Facilities](#)
- [Contact the CISA regional office for risk assessment and guidance](#)

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**To develop de-escalation palm cards for your team, please edit the **red sections** in the sample palm card below to include information specific to your jurisdiction.**

## **How to edit PDF files:**

How to edit PDF files:

1. Open a file in Acrobat.
  2. Click on the “Edit PDF” tool in the right pane.
  3. Use Acrobat editing tools:
    - Add new text, edit text, or update fonts using selections from the Format list.
    - Add, replace, move, or resize images on the page using selections from the Objects list.
    - Click the other tools to edit your PDF further. You can add a watermark and annotate PDFs too.
  4. Save your edited PDF.
  5. Name your file and click the “Save” button. That’s it!
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## **KEY RULES & REGULATIONS**

Insert key rules and regulations relating to:

- The legal limits on disruption by members of the public, and when disruptors should be removed from the election location
- Guns at the polls, particularly laws regarding brandishing firearms
- The rights and responsibilities of members of the public at election locations
- Provide the levels of action (de-escalation, expulsion, involvement of law enforcement) and the actions/thresholds that will trigger them

## **CONTINUALLY ASSESS SAFETY**

Signs of imminent danger include:

- Blocking movement
- Posture poised to strike or lunge
- Standing in a position to attack or defend
- Personal space violations
- Unauthorized attempts to enter a restricted area
- Attempts to avoid security personnel
- Abandoning objects or packages
- Threats or overly aggressive behavior
- Darting eyes, clenched jaw
- Quick, unexpected shift to silence or disengagement
- Enlarged posture
- Hidden, raised, or flailing hands
- Erratic, incongruous, or incoherent speech

If you see signs of imminent danger or feel anyone's safety is threatened, immediately contact the police at **[[number]]**.

## **IMPORTANT CONTACT INFO**

**Election Official's Office: **[[Contact Info]]****

**Local Police: **[[Contact info]]****

**IN CASE OF EMERGENCY DIAL 911**

## **SAMPLE PALM CARD – PERSONALIZE FOR YOUR OFFICE**

### **DE-ESCALATION USING THE CLARA METHOD**

#### **CALM/CENTER**

Stay calm and try to put aside any impatience or frustration. Don't let your feelings toward the disruptor or their beliefs enter the interaction.

#### **LISTEN**

Use active listening: Avoid interrupting, demonstrate concern, and try to understand what the speaker is saying. Ask questions, using kind language and a patient, curious tone. Your affect and body language should express caring interest in their perspective—not impatience or skepticism. Ask as many questions as possible.

#### **AFFIRM**

Once the speaker is done, repeat what you understand to be their points in an affirming way, to demonstrate you have heard them. Ask more questions to clarify.

Invite clarification and validate their experience without suggesting that any incorrect factual premises are accurate.

#### **RESPOND**

Try to brainstorm positive actions that might address their concerns (for example, filing a formal complaint).

If addressing their concerns isn't possible because of legal or practical restrictions, emphasize the reasons for the restrictions, including the impact on voters and the community if the restrictions aren't honored.

#### **ADD**

If appropriate, point out further resources for them to check out later. If necessary, ask them to change their behavior using positive, nonjudgmental language.

### **OTHER HELPFUL TECHNIQUES**

#### **SLOW DOWN**

The primary goal of de-escalation is to stabilize, slow, and reduce the intensity of the situation, not to achieve quick resolution.

#### **MOVE THE DISRUPTOR**

Moving away from crowds can help prevent voter intimidation and reduce conversational temperature.

#### **APPEAR KIND AND RESPECTFUL**

Keep a low decibel, even, kind, and respectful tone. Never escalate tone or body language.

#### **ASK QUESTIONS**

Keep the focus on simple, open-ended questions for as long as possible to slow the interaction.

#### **DON'T DEBATE**

You may disagree, but don't get into a dispute. Instead, listen and ask questions.

#### **EMPHASIZE SHARED VALUES**

Remind the disruptor that your responsibility is to ensure that all eligible voters can vote—and that is the goal of the rules and procedures.

#### **RESPECT YOUR LIMITS**

De-escalation is hard. If the interaction is too challenging and you feel you cannot be calm or effective, call in help.