The Hardest Part of the Job:
De-Escalation Skills for the City Clerk's Office



Kawika Lau
Keynote Speaker & Facilitator
Retired FLETC Instructor,
Combat Veteran

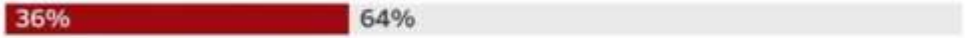
More than **1 in 3** local election officials have experienced **threats, harassment, or abuse**

Pop up messages offered the following definitions:

Harassed: Persistent, uninvited behavior, attention, or actions that cause distress, fear, or discomfort, such as stalking.
Abused: Demeaning, derogatory, or offensive comments, gestures, or actions that upset, belittle, and/or humiliate.
Threatened: Explicit or implicit expressions communicating an intention to harm, injure, or cause damage to an individual or others associated with them, implying imminent risk to a person's well-being and safety.

BRENNAN CENTER FOR JUSTICE

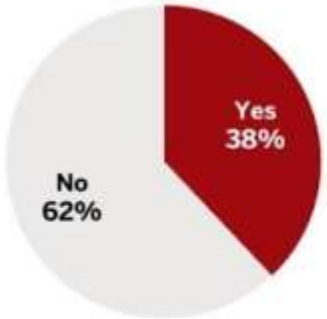
Have you ever been **harassed or abused** because of your job as a local election official?



Have you ever been **threatened** because of your job as a local election official?

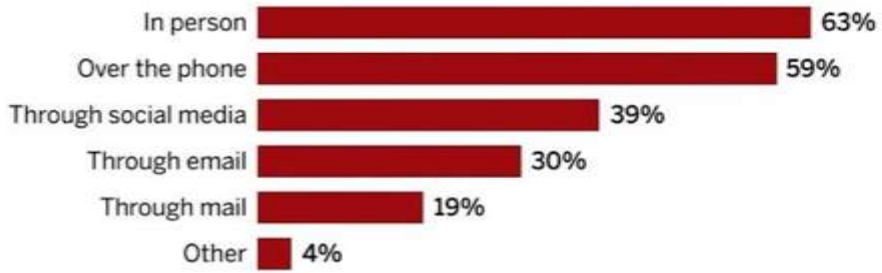


Yes, harassed, abused, or threatened



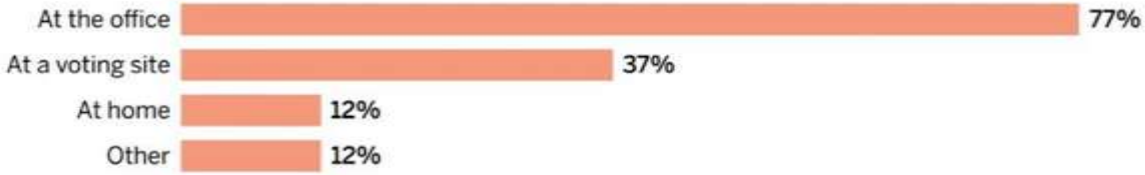
Local election officials who report being threatened were most likely to receive threats in person or over the phone; some received threats at home

(Among respondents who report being threatened)
You indicated that you have been threatened because of your job as a local election official. How have you been threatened? Please select all that apply.



n = 141

(Among those who reported being threatened in person)
Where were you when you were threatened in person? Please select all that apply.



n = 89

BRENNAN CENTER FOR JUSTICE

By the End of This Session, You Will Be Able To...

Understand the Biology & Escalation Patterns



Describe the amygdala hijack and why it overrides rational thought, then spot the audience effect, emotional contagion, performative confrontation, the shame-to-anger pipeline, and the point of no return.

Use Advanced Verbal Techniques

Set boundaries without escalating, validate emotion without conceding ground, apply labeling and the verbal de-escalation formula, question strategically, and exit a call professionally.

Adapt to Seven Hard Contexts



Recording/auditors, phone-only calls, observers & challengers, staff conflict, mediation, crisis/impairment, and language barriers.

Know Your Legal & Policy Limits



Understand your authority, when to call law enforcement, recording laws, and the physical safety lines you never cross.

Protect Your Own Wellbeing

Regulate your own nervous system first — the biggest lever in the room — recognize secondary stress and compassion fatigue and use team-based and personal recovery habits.

Practice It Out Loud



Run it in role-play, document it afterward, get peer feedback, and leave with one behavior to try next election.

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PART 1

The Neuroscience of Conflict

Before you can de-escalate someone else, you have to understand what's happening inside a stressed brain — including your own.

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Why Understanding the Body's Response Matters

1

Your nervous system can't tell the difference.

It reacts the same way to someone yelling at your counter as it does to a true physical threat — it fires first and thinks later.



2

Self-awareness is the first de-escalation skill.

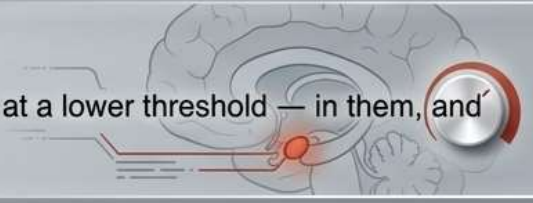
If you can't recognize the alarm going off in your own body, you can't manage it — and you can't help manage someone else's.



3

Past experience can turn up the sensitivity.

A history of stress or trauma can make the amygdala fire faster and at a lower threshold — in them, and in you.



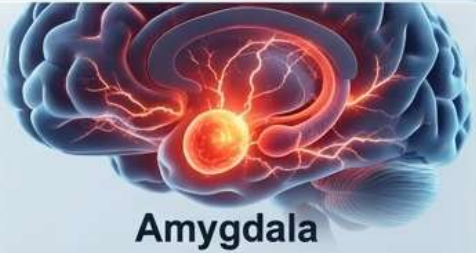
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The Brain's Security Team



Prefrontal Cortex

The “thinking brain.” Reasoning, perspective-taking, impulse control, policy knowledge.



Amygdala

The alarm system. Fast, reactive, and built to protect — it reacts first and thinks later.



Hippocampus

Memory, context, and pattern recognition — it tells the amygdala what a threat has looked like before.

The Amygdala Hijack: emotion overrides reason. All three systems need to work together — threat mode shuts that teamwork down, for the person in front of you and for you.

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What the Hijack Does to Decision-Making

Tunnel Vision & Auditory Exclusion

Missed details, difficulty hearing tone or context — you focus on the threat and lose the room.



Adrenaline & Cortisol Surge

Rapid heartbeat, shallow breathing, shaking hands — the body mobilizes for action it doesn't need.



Reduced Access to the Prefrontal Cortex

Impulsive reactions, black-and-white thinking — this is where the reply you wish you could take back comes from.



Post-Threat Fatigue

An emotional crash once the chemicals subside — irritability and fog that compound over a long shift.



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The Escalation Cycle & the Point of No Return

1 — Trigger

A rule, delay, or perceived slight sparks the first reaction.



2 — Escalation

Voice rises, body tightens, language sharpens. Verbal tactics still work well here.



3 — Peak / Crisis

Reasoning is offline. This is the point of no return — words alone may not land.



4 — De-escalation

Physiology starts to drop. This is where your calm becomes contagious.



5 — Recovery

Person stabilizes but stays fatigued and sensitive — avoid re-triggering too soon.



Past the point of no return, your job shifts from persuading to containing: buy time, protect safety, and use the tap-out — words come back into play once physiology starts to drop in Phase 4.

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DIAGNOSE BEFORE YOU RESPOND

The TEB Matrix

Thought – Emotion – Behavior: a fast read on what kind of situation you're actually in, before you pick a technique.

Conflict

Thinking brain is online. The person disagrees, wants to be heard, or is testing a boundary.

Reason and negotiate: boundary language, validation, questions.

Crisis

Thinking brain is overloaded, not offline. Overwhelmed, cornered, or flooded with stress hormones.



Slow down and simplify: fewer words, more time, calm repetition.

Altered Reality

Perception itself is unreliable — severe crisis, impairment, or medical event. Logic won't land.

Prioritize safety over resolution: tap out, get support, don't argue facts.

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This voter has just been told that their name is not on the voter rolls.

Consider:

1. What are they saying?
2. What are they doing (actions)?
3. What might they be thinking or believing?
4. What emotions might they be experiencing?



This voter is convinced that the election was stolen and he has come in to confront you.

Consider:

1. What are they saying?
2. What are they doing (actions)?
3. What might they be thinking or believing?
4. What emotions might they be experiencing?



This voter has come in to cancel the registration of their spouse that recently passed away.

Consider:

1. What are they saying?
2. What are they doing (actions)?
3. What might they be thinking or believing?
4. What emotions might they be experiencing?

DIAGNOSE BEFORE YOU RESPOND

Fight, Flight, Freeze — or Manage

The nervous system doesn't just escalate — it picks a survival strategy. Match your response to the one you're seeing.



Fight

Confrontational, loud, squaring up — the nervous system trying to overpower the threat.

Lower your own volume and pace. Give a face-saving way to stand down.



Flight

Pacing, trying to leave, refusing to engage, talking fast — trying to escape the threat.

Slow the exit gently — don't block the path. Offer a next step, not a demand to stay.



Freeze

Flat affect, minimal response, seems "checked out" or unusually still — shut down, not calm.

Use short, simple, concrete language. Give extra time before expecting a response.



Trained Response

Manage / Operate

A trained, deliberate response — not instinct. You recognize the activation and consciously run your practiced technique instead.



This is what repetition builds: a pause between stimulus and instinct where skill takes over.

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Regulate Yourself First

A regulated staff member is the single biggest de-escalation lever in the room. Calm is contagious — in both directions.

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Three Fast Tools to Calm Your Nervous System



Box Breathing

Inhale 4 counts, hold 4, exhale 4, hold 4. Repeat 3–4 cycles. Slows heart rate and quiets the amygdala within a minute.



The Physiological Sigh

Two quick inhales through the nose, one long exhale through the mouth. The fastest known way to lower stress in real time.



5-4-3-2-1 Grounding

Silently name 5 things you see, 4 you hear, 3 you feel, 2 you smell, 1 you taste. Pulls you out of tunnel vision.

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CLARA

THE CLARA METHOD

C Calm	• Regulate yourself first.
L Listen	• Without interrupting.
A Affirm	• The emotion, not the accusation.
R Respond	• With clear, factual information.
A Add value	• Offer a next step or resource.

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DE-ESCALATION — VERBAL COMMUNICATION

Your tone of voice sets the emotional tone of the interaction. When your voice communicates calm, respect, and empathy, you create the conditions for de-escalation—often before your words even register.

Remain respectful and courteous. Use phrases like "please" and "thank you."

TONE
+
VOLUME
+
RATE OF SPEECH
+
INFLECTION
=
VERBAL DE-ESC.

TONE
Speak calmly to demonstrate empathy.

VOLUME
Monitor your volume and avoid raising your voice.

RATE OF SPEECH
Speak slowly — though not too slowly — because it is soothing.

INFLECTION
Avoid emphasizing words or syllables in ways that can escalate the situation.

INSTEAD OF SAYING:	TRY:
"Calm down"	"I can see that you are upset.."
"I can't help you"	"I want to help. What can I do?"
"I know how you feel"	"I understand that you feel..."
"Come with me"	"May I speak with you?"

Four Techniques That Change Outcomes

Neutral Validation

"I hear ___. What I can tell you is ___."
Validate the emotion without conceding the accusation or demand.

Boundary-Setting

Name the behavior → state the boundary → state what happens next. State it as fact, not judgment.

Labeling

"It sounds like…" — never "you are…" Naming an emotion tentatively often reduces its intensity.

Strategic Questions

"What would help right now?" Open questions pull someone toward their thinking brain, not away from it.

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CHANGE THE ENVIRONMENT



OFFER TO CONNECT SOMEWHERE LESS CROWDED OR INTENSE

"WOULD YOU LIKE TO FIND SOMEPLACE THAT'S QUIETER SO WE CAN TALK?"



ENCOURAGE OTHER BYSTANDERS TO GIVE SOME SPACE TO PEOPLE WHO ARE ESCALATED

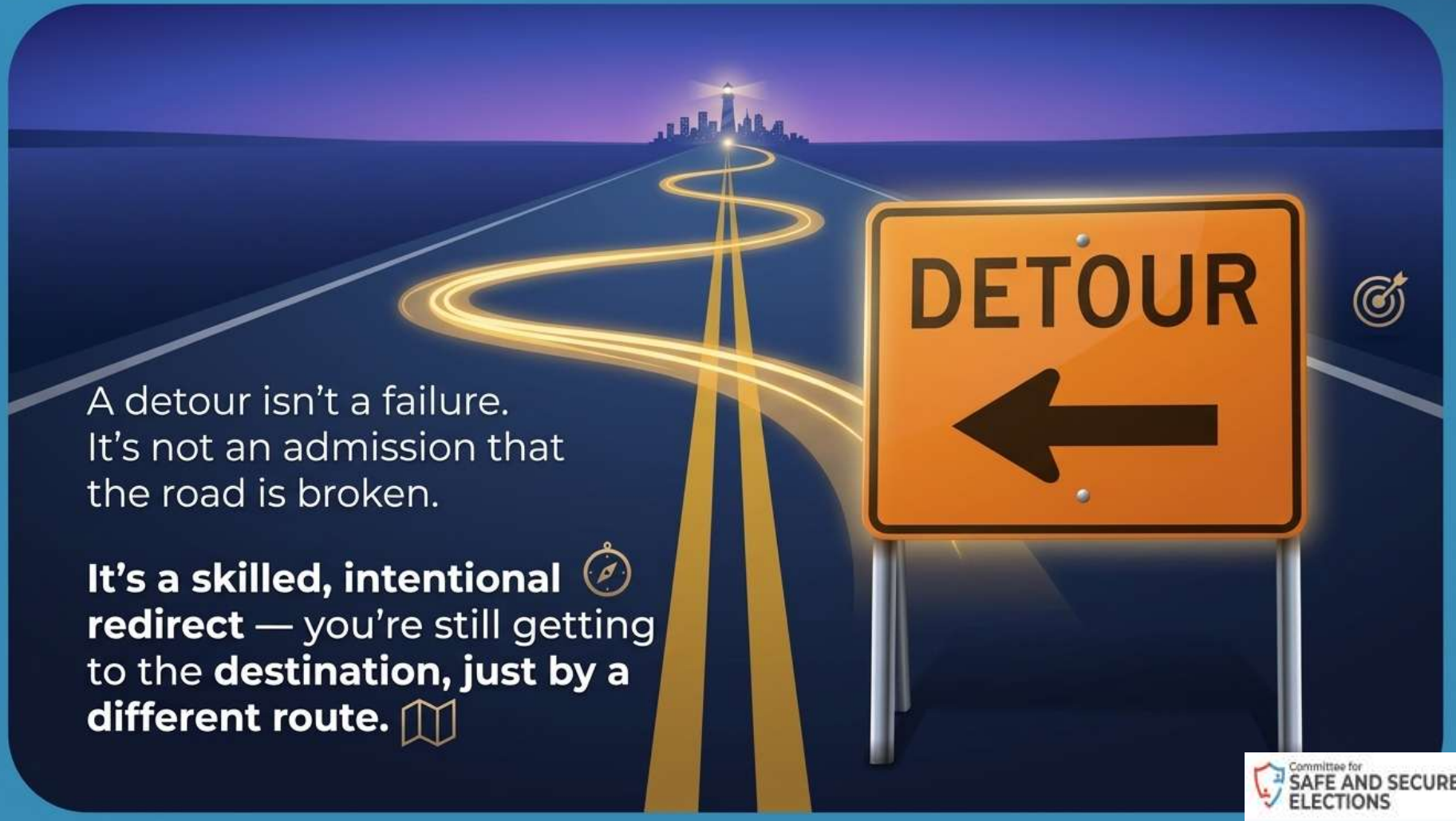
"LET'S GIVE THEM SOME SPACE."

*SOMETIMES HAVING MANY PEOPLE AROUND CAN ADD TO THE ENERGY THEY MIGHT BE FEELING

DE-ESCALATE BY CHANGING THE SPACE:

- ALTER THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT TO REDUCE INTENSITY
- **CREATE CONDITIONS** FOR BOTH PARTIES TO RE-FOCUS AND RESOLVE ISSUES CONSTRUCTIVELY

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DETOUR
A detour isn't a failure.
It's not an admission that
the road is broken.
It's a skilled, intentional redirect — you're still getting to the destination, just by a different route.
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Engage Them in Finding the Resolution



COOPERATIVE SHIFT:
Bringing people into problem-solving creates a fundamental shift – neurologically and relationally. Neurologically, it activates forward-thinking pathways; Relationally, it fosters collaborative trust.

THE POWER OF ONE QUESTION:
Asking 'What would a good outcome look like for you today?' demands forward-thinking and problem-solving, rather than reinforcing stay-stuck grievance patterns. It re-directs energy towards positive future states.

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Reading Advanced Escalation Patterns

Five dynamics that show up across the hardest public-facing situations.

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Escalation Patterns to Watch For

1

The Audience Effect

Backing down in front of an audience reads as losing, not resolving. Change the geometry, not just the words — stepping aside removes the incentive to perform.



2

Emotional Contagion

Stress and certainty spread. One raised voice or one phone lifted to record can shift a whole room's read of the situation. Interrupt it early.



3

Shame-to-Anger Pipeline

A person who feels embarrassed will often convert that shame into anger, because anger feels more powerful. Watch for anger that doesn't match the size of the problem.



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PATTERN 1 OF 5

The Audience Effect

PATTERN 1 OF 5

A conflict changes shape the moment other people are watching. Backing down in front of an audience reads as losing, not resolving — so people hold positions longer and louder than they would one-on-one.

- Shows up anywhere a line, lobby, or room full of onlookers is present — a counter, a polling place, a count center.
- The fastest fix is often physical: change the geometry, not just the words.

Stepping just a few feet to the side, or turning a person slightly away from the crowd, removes the audience — and removes the incentive to perform.

PATTERN 2 OF 5

Emotional Contagion & Social Proof

Stress and certainty spread. One raised voice, one phone lifted to record, or one person stepping out of line can shift an entire room's read of the situation — bystanders start looking for confirmation that something is wrong.

- Watch for the tipping point: a second phone comes out, a line stops moving, people start whispering instead of waiting.
- Interrupt it early — waiting lets the read of the room harden.

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PATTERN 3 OF 5

Performative Confrontation

Some interactions aren't information-seeking — they're content-generating. The person isn't listening for an answer; they're listening for a soundbite, a mistake, or a reaction that plays well online.

- The tell: they keep circling back to the same claim even after a clear, complete answer — and their energy shifts once a camera or crowd is present.
- The goal shifts: you're not trying to win the argument — you're trying to stay unusable as a clip.

PATTERN 4 OF 5

Identity Threat & the Shame-to-Anger Pipeline

A person who feels embarrassed or caught off guard will often convert that shame into anger, because anger feels more powerful than shame. The anger is rarely really about the rule — it's about protecting self-image.

- Watch for a sudden shift from quiet, confused, or apologetic to loud, accusatory, or personal — that shift is the tell.
- When anger doesn't match the size of the actual problem, that mismatch is the tell.

Verbal & Nonverbal Techniques

Exact language and body positioning for the patterns you just learned to recognize.

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TECHNIQUE 1 OF 8

Boundary-Setting Language That Doesn't Escalate

State a boundary as a fact about what will happen — not a judgment about the person. Structure: name the behavior → state the boundary → state what happens next.

- **Weak:** "You need to stop being aggressive." — a judgment that invites defensiveness.
- **Strong:** "I'm going to ask you not to record behind the counter. If that continues, I'll need to ask you to step to the side."

"For everyone's safety and to keep our chain-of-custody clean, I'll need you to remain behind the line."

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TECHNIQUE 2 OF 8

Neutral Validation Without Conceding Ground

Validate the emotion in front of you without validating the accusation or demand. This is the single most useful phrase-shape in the whole session.

- This same shape works even when you're validating two different people's frustrations at once — without ruling on who's right.

"I hear ___. What I can tell you is ___." — e.g. "I hear that this feels unfair. What I can tell you is the deadline is set by state law, and here's what you can still do today."

TECHNIQUE 3 OF 8



The Professional Exit Script

On the phone **especially**, there's no natural pause point. Use a rehearsed, three-part exit: give the next step, name the condition for **re-engaging**, then end — without **asking permission** or **apologizing**.

"I'm going to give you the next step, and then I will need to end the call."
→ "I'm ending the call now. You can call back when you're ready to continue respectfully."

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TECHNIQUE 4 OF 8

Staying Under the Room's Volume

Matching an escalating voice signals competition. Staying noticeably calmer and quieter than the loudest voice in the room signals control — and gives everyone else a model to follow.

- Pair a lower, slower voice with open hands and shoulders down.
- Stand angled, not squared-off — a squared stance reads as confrontational.

You have the ability to manage the volume. Volume does not mean power or authority. Don't take the bait.

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TECHNIQUE 5 OF 8

Strategic Questioning

Open-ended questions pull someone toward their thinking brain because answering requires reflection, not just reaction. Closed yes/no questions can feel like interrogation and re-trigger defensiveness.

- Trade “Why would you think that?” (challenging) for “What would help right now?” or “What outcome are you hoping for?” (collaborative).
- A well-timed question can slow a fast talker down without you ever raising your own voice.

“Help me understand what you need to happen next” shifts someone from venting to problem-solving.

TECHNIQUE 6 OF 8

Labeling: Naming the Emotion Without Judgment

Saying a person's emotion out loud, tentatively and without judgment, often reduces its intensity — being seen accurately is calming in itself. This is different from validation: labeling names the feeling; validation responds to it.

- Start with “It seems like…” or “It sounds like…” — never “You are…,” which feels like a diagnosis.
- If the label is wrong, people will usually correct you — which is useful information either way.

> *“It sounds like this has felt really disrespectful, on top of everything else today.”*

TECHNIQUE 7 OF 8

Tactical Repositioning: The Response-Ability Zone

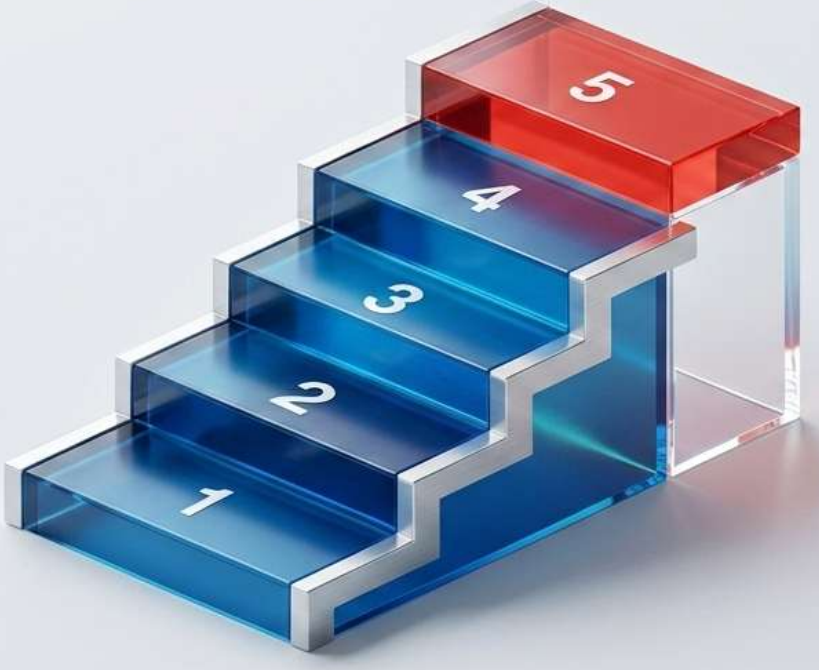
Your words only work if you're physically able to use them, and able to disengage if needed. Before you speak, do a fast scene assessment: where are the exits, what's between you and the person, and is anyone else nearby who could help?

- Maintain a “response-ability zone” — enough distance and a clear path that you can step back, call for help, or redirect without feeling trapped.
- Use existing physical barriers (a counter, a doorway, a desk) deliberately rather than standing fully exposed — this isn't about hiding, it's about staying able to act.

Position yourself at an angle near an open path, not squared off in a corner — verbal de-escalation and physical positioning work together, not separately.

The Behavioral Influence Stairway

Skipping a step — jumping to influence without rapport — is why persuasion attempts backfire.



1. **Active Listening**
   Listen without interrupting; use labeling and strategic questions.
2. **Empathy**
   Neutral validation — show you understand their experience.
3. **Rapport**
   Genuine, earned trust builds from consistent, calm follow-through.
4. **Influence**
   Only now will suggestions or requests actually land.
5. **Behavioral Change**
   Voluntary cooperation — not compliance forced by pressure.

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High-Difficulty Contexts

Crowds, cameras and high-stakes moments, where de-escalation is hardest.

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RECORDING & FIRST AMENDMENT AUDITORS

CONTEXT 1 OF 7



Builds on the foundations FAA guidance (Know / Prepare / Protect / Share). The advanced layer: name the behavior once, set the boundary once, then stop narrating your own compliance.

- Over-explaining reads as anxious on camera and gives more material to clip.

Answer the legitimate question → set the boundary → redirect to a resource or supervisor — then hold that loop instead of expanding it.




SECURITY ALERT!
HE HAS A CAMERA!
vote!

CONTEXT 2 OF 7

Phone Interactions Without Visual Cues

You lose body language, but you gain total control over pacing. Slow your own rate of speech deliberately — a fast, interrupting caller will often begin to match a genuinely slower, calmer pace.

- Use silence on purpose: a brief pause after an outburst, followed by a calm restatement, often does more than any sentence.

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CONTEXT 3 OF 7

Credentialed Observers & Partisan Challengers

The core risk is being maneuvered into a posture that looks partisan no matter what you do. The fix: make every boundary about the documented rule, stated identically regardless of who's in front of you.

Say the rule the same way, in the same words, to both sides — out loud, so witnesses hear the consistency.

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CONTEXT 4 OF 7

Staff-to-Staff Conflict & Internal Spillover

The public can see internal conflict as fast as external conflict, and it damages trust just as much. The supervisor's job is to interrupt fast, move it private, and defer the substance.

> *Confrontation can be harder when you know the individuals. Perception is reality in the eyes of the public. If they perceive things are out of control in your office, that becomes the reality for them.*

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CONTEXT 5 OF 7 · THE SIX-STEP MEDIATOR MODEL

Mediating Between Two Members of the Public

1 Reset

Pause. Both of you — stop speaking for a moment.

2 Validate both

I hear you — fairness matters. And I hear you — urgency is stressful.

3 Define the boundary

No one insults anyone in this room.

4 Offer a solution

How about we step aside for a moment. You keep your place in line.

5 Hold the line

I won’t allow you back in line until you agree to speak and treat the other respectfully.

6 Close & restart

Thank you for your cooperation. Let’s get you back in line.

❤️ Crisis, Impairment, or Medical Distress

Someone in a mental health crisis, under the influence, or in medical distress needs a different read than an ordinary escalation — the goal shifts from resolving a dispute to keeping everyone safe until the right help arrives.

- Slow everything down, use simple concrete language, and avoid sudden movements or crowding.
- This is a tap-out situation by default — loop in a supervisor and, if there's any safety concern, call for medical or law enforcement support early rather than trying to talk it through alone.

> "I want to help you. I'm going to get someone else over here who can help too — stay with me."

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CONTEXT 7 OF 7

Language Barriers & Communication Differences

A limited-English speaker, a Deaf or hard-of-hearing voter, or someone with a communication-affecting disability can look escalated when they're actually just struggling to be understood — misread frustration as hostility, and you'll escalate a situation that didn't need to be one.

- Slow your own pace, use plain language over jargon, and confirm understanding by asking them to repeat back next steps.
- Know your office's language line, interpreter, and accommodation resources before you need them — not while someone is waiting.

Written materials, pictures, or a translation app can de-escalate faster than any spoken technique when words aren't landing.

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Legal, Policy & Safety Boundaries

Knowing your authority protects you, your colleagues, and the process.

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1 OF 4

Know Your Authority

You can enforce your office's documented rules and procedures. You cannot detain, search, or physically compel anyone — that authority belongs to law enforcement, not staff.

- Know the specific rules you're empowered to enforce before an election, not while enforcing them.
- When someone asks "by what authority," cite the specific policy or law — not just "because I said so."

> *"This is our office's posted policy on [X], and I'm required to apply it the same way to everyone."*

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2 OF 4

When and How to Call Law Enforcement

Escalation that involves a real safety threat, a refusal to leave after a lawful request, or any physical contact is beyond what verbal de-escalation should be asked to solve alone.

- Set a personal threshold in advance — don't decide for the first time in the moment whether a situation has crossed the line.
- Calling for backup or law enforcement early is not a failure of your de-escalation skills; waiting too long is the more common mistake.

Know your process for requesting law enforcement before you need it: who calls, what number, what you say.

CSSE

3 OF 4

Recording Laws & Your Rights at the Counter

Members of the public generally have a legal right to record in public-facing areas of a government office. Your rights are narrower and different: you can set reasonable, content-neutral boundaries about space and access, not about the recording itself.

- You can restrict where someone stands, but probably not whether they film — conflating the two is what turns a policy question into a rights dispute.
- Know your jurisdiction's specific rules on recording in public offices, and confirm them with your legal counsel before an election, not during one.

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Physical Safety Boundaries: What You Never Do

As civilian staff, your physical safety toolkit is entirely defensive: create distance, use barriers, and disengage.

- If a situation reaches physical contact or the threat of it, your job is to retreat and get help — not to intervene physically.
- This also applies to protecting a colleague: verbally redirect and call for support rather than stepping physically between people.

Work with your staff ahead of time on what the protocol will be should someone become physical with a member of the public or your team.

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After-Action: Documenting What Happened

Good documentation protects you, your office, and the process — and it's a skill, not an afterthought. Right after a hard interaction, write a short note using this structure:

Who / When / Where	Names if known, date, time, and specific location.
What happened	Neutral, factual description — observable behavior, not your interpretation of motive.
What you did	The specific boundary, technique, or tap-out you used.
Outcome & follow-up	How it resolved, and whether law enforcement, a supervisor, or a report was involved.

Quick practice: take two minutes and write a 3–5 sentence note for the role-play scenario you just ran.

Protecting Your Own Wellbeing

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Protecting Your Own Wellbeing

Secondary Stress Is Real

Repeated exposure to other people's crises has a cumulative cost — shorter patience, flatter affect, slower recovery. This isn't a personal failing.





Normalize the Tap-Out

Recovery is faster when it's a team routine, not individual willpower. Rotate high-friction posts and build in brief peer check-ins.







Build a Reset Ritual

One physiological sigh, a sip of water, a three-second shoulder drop before the next interaction. Come back to baseline before it starts.







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1 OF 3

Secondary Stress & Compassion Fatigue

Repeated exposure to other people's crises — even without a single dramatic incident — has a cumulative physiological cost. Across a long election day, that cost shows up as shorter patience, flatter affect, and slower recovery between interactions.

- Watch for the signs in yourself: irritability that wasn't there this morning, dreading the next interaction, or feeling numb rather than calm.
- This isn't a personal failing — it's a predictable cost of the work, and it's manageable with the right habits.



2 OF 3

Team-Based Recovery & Peer Check-Ins

Recovery is faster and more reliable when it's built into the team's routine, not left to individual willpower at the end of a long shift.

- Rotate staff out of the highest-friction posts (the counter, the phone line) periodically rather than leaving the same person there all day.
- Build in brief peer check-ins after any hard interaction — sixty seconds of “you okay?” resets more than it costs.
- Normalize the tap-out as a team value, not an individual weakness — supervisors should model using it themselves.



3 OF 3

Personal Reset Rituals Between Interactions

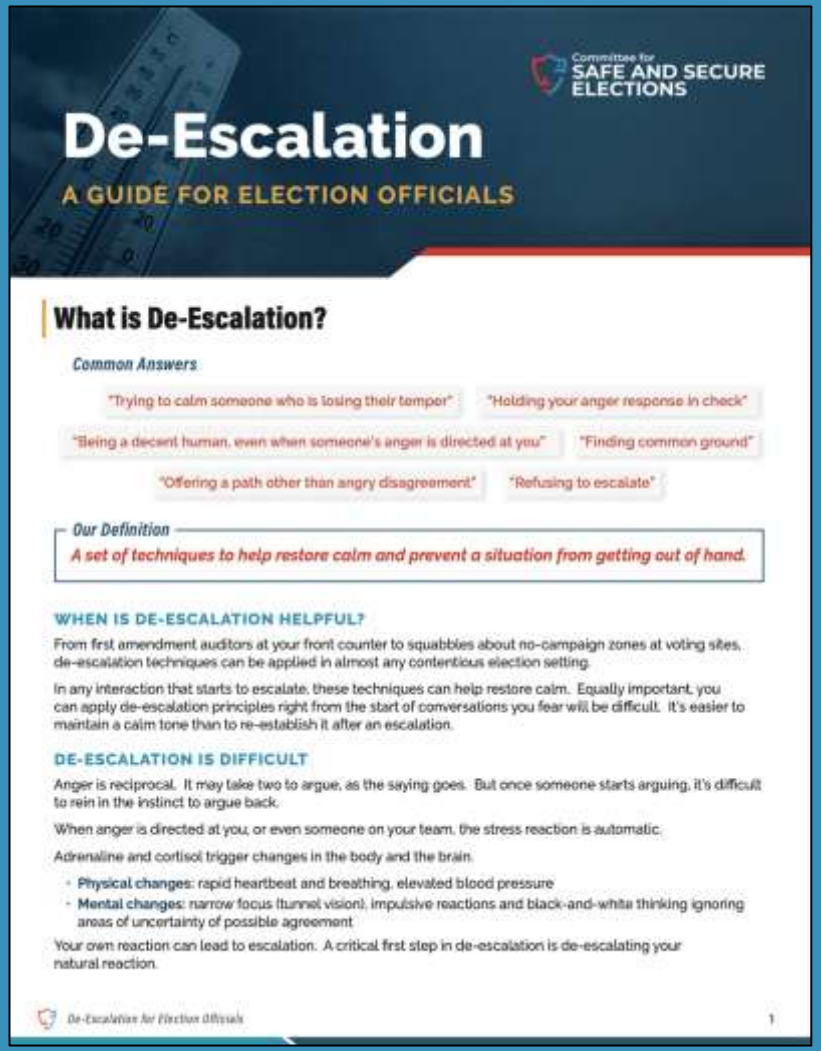
A short, consistent ritual between hard interactions prevents stress from stacking up across the day. The specific ritual matters less than doing the same one every time.

- One physiological sigh, a sip of water, and a three-second shoulder drop before the next person approaches.
- Step out of sightline for ten seconds if you can — recovery starts faster once you're briefly out of performance mode.

The goal is to come back to baseline before the next interaction starts.

Solutions and Resources

Committee for SAFE AND SECURE ELECTIONS



Committee for SAFE AND SECURE ELECTIONS

De-Escalation

A GUIDE FOR ELECTION OFFICIALS

What is De-Escalation?

Common Answers

"Trying to calm someone who is losing their temper" "Holding your anger response in check"

"Being a decent human, even when someone's anger is directed at you" "Finding common ground"

"Offering a path other than angry disagreement" "Refusing to escalate"

Our Definition

A set of techniques to help restore calm and prevent a situation from getting out of hand.

WHEN IS DE-ESCALATION HELPFUL?

From first amendment auditors at your front counter to squabbles about no-campaign zones at voting sites, de-escalation techniques can be applied in almost any contentious election setting.

In any interaction that starts to escalate, these techniques can help restore calm. Equally important, you can apply de-escalation principles right from the start of conversations you fear will be difficult. It's easier to maintain a calm tone than to re-establish it after an escalation.

DE-ESCALATION IS DIFFICULT

Anger is reciprocal. It may take two to argue, as the saying goes. But once someone starts arguing, it's difficult to rein in the instinct to argue back.

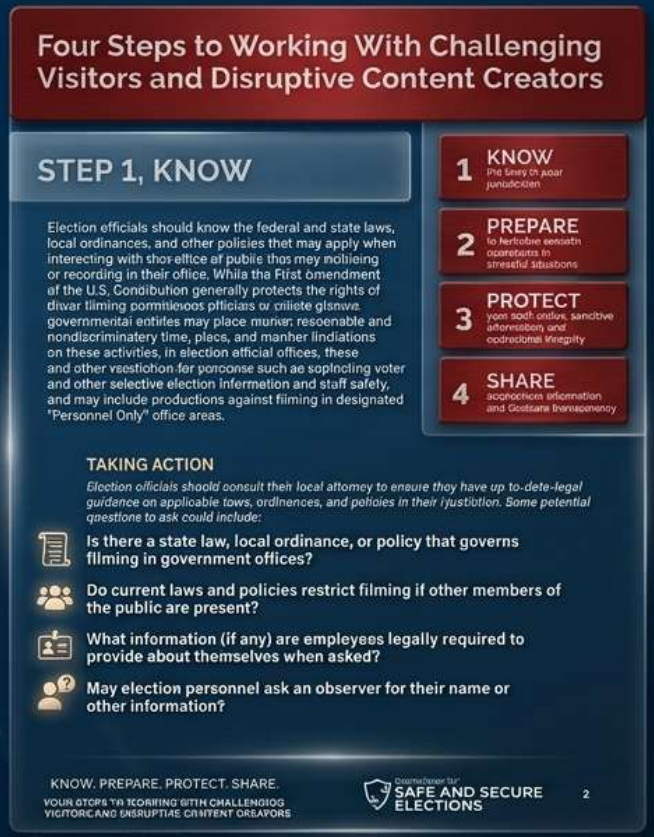
When anger is directed at you, or even someone on your team, the stress reaction is automatic.

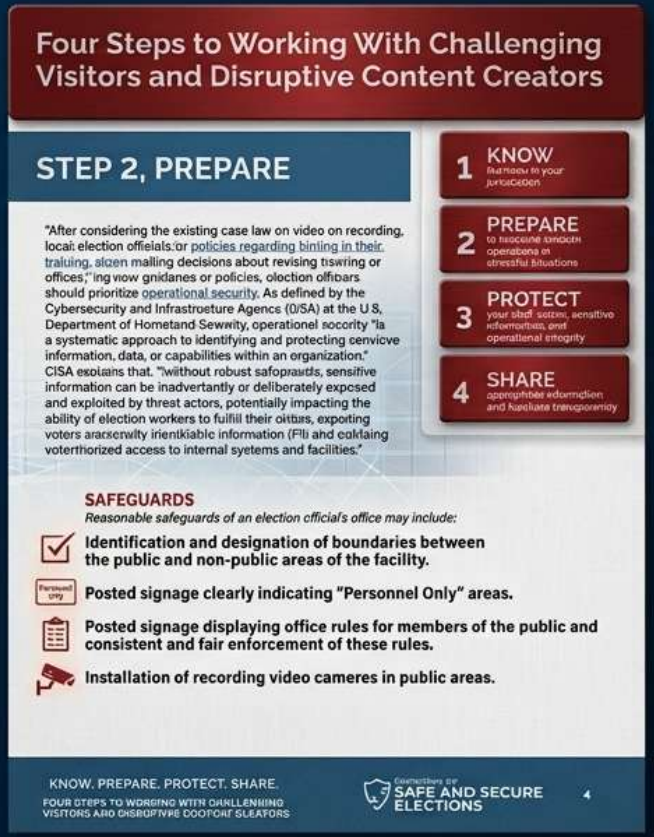
Adrenaline and cortisol trigger changes in the body and the brain.

- **Physical changes:** rapid heartbeat and breathing, elevated blood pressure
- **Mental changes:** narrow focus (tunnel vision), impulsive reactions and black-and-white thinking ignoring areas of uncertainty of possible agreement

Your own reaction can lead to escalation. A critical first step in de-escalation is de-escalating your natural reaction.

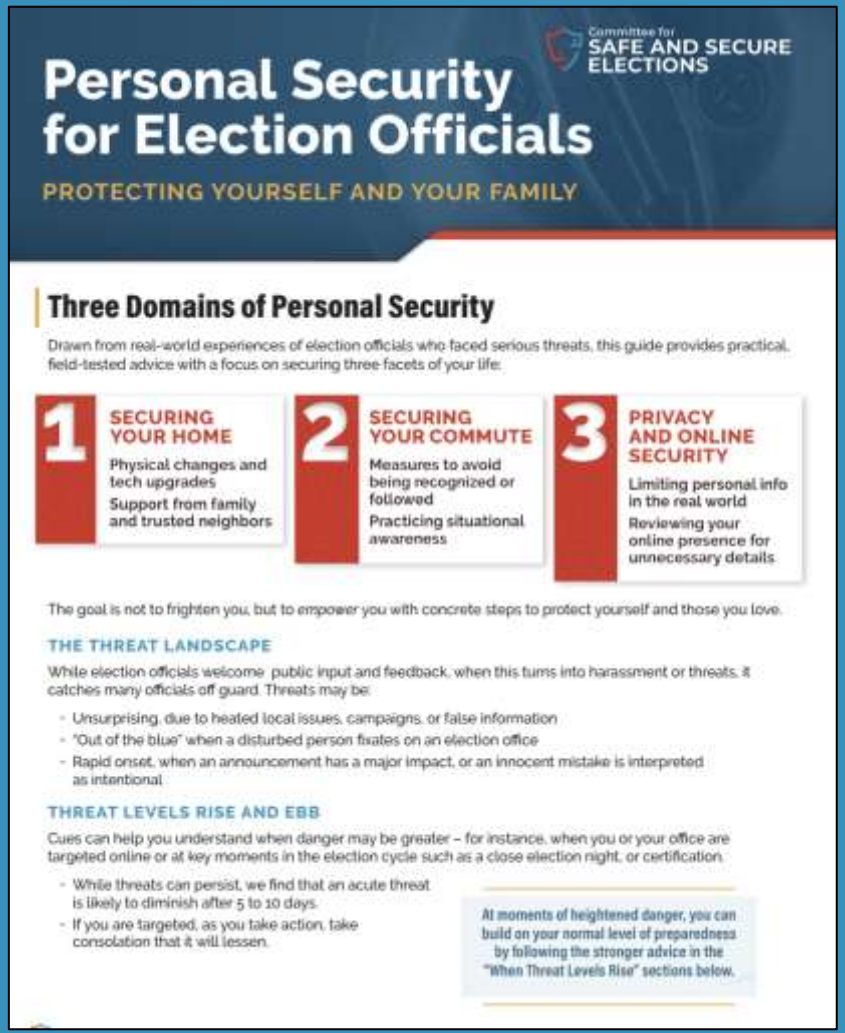
De-Escalation: A Guide for Election Officials





KNOW. PREPARE. PROTECT. SHARE.

Committee for SAFE AND SECURE ELECTIONS



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Personal Security for Election Officials

PROTECTING YOURSELF AND YOUR FAMILY

Three Domains of Personal Security

Drawn from real-world experiences of election officials who faced serious threats, this guide provides practical, field-tested advice with a focus on securing three facets of your life:

1 SECURING YOUR HOME
Physical changes and tech upgrades
Support from family and trusted neighbors

2 SECURING YOUR COMMUTE
Measures to avoid being recognized or followed
Practicing situational awareness

3 PRIVACY AND ONLINE SECURITY
Limiting personal info in the real world
Reviewing your online presence for unnecessary details

The goal is not to frighten you, but to empower you with concrete steps to protect yourself and those you love.

THE THREAT LANDSCAPE

While election officials welcome public input and feedback, when this turns into harassment or threats, it catches many officials off guard. Threats may be:

- Unsurprising, due to heated local issues, campaigns, or false information
- "Out of the blue" when a disturbed person fixates on an election office
- Rapid onset, when an announcement has a major impact, or an innocent mistake is interpreted as intentional

THREAT LEVELS RISE AND EBB

Cues can help you understand when danger may be greater – for instance, when you or your office are targeted online or at key moments in the election cycle such as a close election night, or certification.

- While threats can persist, we find that an acute threat is likely to diminish after 5 to 10 days.
- If you are targeted, as you take action, take consolation that it will lessen.

At moments of heightened danger, you can build on your normal level of preparedness by following the stronger advice in the "When Threat Levels Rise" sections below.

Personal Security for Election Officials

CSSE LAW ENFORCEMENT QUICK REFERENCE GUIDES

AVAILABLE IN ALL 50 STATES!



- Law Enforcement Quick Reference Guides that summarize key penal provisions found within state law for each state and the District of Columbia.
- Information is updated to reflect new 2026 statutes, regulations, voting hours, and election dates.

SCAN THE CODE TO FIND & DOWNLOAD OR PRINT YOURS TODAY!

Key Points

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Prioritize Personal Control and Emotional Regulation

Stay calm and centered: Your demeanor sets the tone. A calm presence can help de-escalate tense situations.

Recognize stress responses: Understand how stress affects behavior. Techniques like deep breathing help manage physiological responses.

Know when to step back: If emotions escalate, it's okay to pause or involve a colleague to keep the environment constructive.

Employ Effective Communication Techniques

Active listening: Give individuals your full attention, acknowledge their concerns, and avoid interrupting.

Use empathetic language: Phrases like "I understand this is frustrating" validate feelings without assigning blame.

Maintain appropriate body language: Open posture, eye contact and respectful distance convey attentiveness and reduce tension.

Prepare and Plan for Potential Disruptions

Understand legal guidelines: Know the laws and protocols on election conduct and voter interactions.

Develop response strategies: Anticipate likely scenarios and plan responses to different types of disruption.

Collaborate with law enforcement: Set up communication channels with local authorities so support is there when needed.

The Hardest Part of the Job:
De-Escalation Skills for the City Clerk's Office



Kawika Lau
Keynote Speaker & Facilitator
Retired FLETC Instructor,
Combat Veteran