The Elections Group

Confident Voices in Critical Times

A Crisis Communications Toolkit for Before, During and After a Critical Elections Incident

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Introduction

Building and Protecting Public Trust in Elections

Remember when news stories about elections focused on candidates? Now, the media's focus is shifting to stories about how elections are run and the people who run them. Election officials are under more scrutiny than ever. When the media puts election administrators under a magnifying glass, even innocent mistakes can look like serious problems. This can shake the public's trust in how elections are run.

During a communications crisis, election officials can't control the narrative. But they can influence how the story plays out. The key is advanced planning and preparation so when something bad happens, your office is ready to respond.

That's why The Elections Group has developed this crisis communications starter toolkit, complete with easy-to-use plans for problems faced by local election officials. It contains straightforward strategies and tools for building goodwill with your community and the media, countering misinformation and dealing with unexpected problems that could throw an election into chaos if mishandled. This guide is designed to help you recognize, plan for and respond to such situations with confidence.

How to Use This Toolkit

Whether you're new to crisis communications or you've already learned some lessons through hard experience, this toolkit can help prepare you for your first challenge or the next one. We suggest you start at the beginning and learn to make plans that will prepare you for whatever comes your way. You can also skip to a section that's relevant to whatever communications problem you're now facing.

The plans your office develops using this toolkit will help you build and protect citizens' trust in the integrity of our election process — before, during and after a crisis. It contains clear-cut procedures to follow and tools and techniques you can adapt to manage whatever crisis you face. In this toolkit, you'll find:

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Tips and templates for proactive communications – designed to help build goodwill with the media and your community:

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- Local Story Ideas
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For additional information and resources on crisis communications and planning, the following websites provide a wealth of information.

- Federal Emergency Management Association
  - Communicating in an Emergency
- Election Assistance Commission
  - Communications 101
  - Contingency Planning
- Centers for Disease Control
  - Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication

Section 1: Proactive Communications

Before we deal with how to react to an election communication crisis, let's talk about things you can do in advance to prepare your office for communicating confidently. First, take a look at your current relationship with the media. When it comes to the reputation of your office, it never hurts to have good working relationships with the media in place. Despite all the news coverage about elections in recent years, many in the public and the media still do not understand the basics of good election administration or election security. That makes you the expert in your community, giving you opportunities to educate the public about all the things your office does to conduct accurate, fair, safe and secure elections following state and federal laws.

In today's diverse media landscape, traditional forms of communication such as TV, radio and newspapers coexist with new, interactive platforms. Bloggers, podcasters and influencers have emerged as impactful voices, providing a dynamic range of community engagement. While many may first think of influencers as only in the fashion or pop culture realm, there are many influencers who engage in politics and current events. To find influencers relevant to elections, consider exploring social media platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, TikTok and YouTube. Look for individuals with a significant following who actively discuss and engage with political topics and/ or current events (you may want to focus your search on those who are in your community or state). Additionally, monitoring popular blogs and podcasts dedicated to election-related commentary can help identify influencers who resonate with specific communities.

If you have good relationships with the media in your community, you're on your way. If you haven't spent much time with them, this is a good opportunity to get to know the media in your community

so they know you're willing to share that expertise and you can make sure they have accurate information about elections.

You should actively seek media coverage – don't wait for reporters to call you and depending on the demographic and size of your jurisdiction, some media outlets may be more effective than others. For example, many Native American communities utilize radio more often than other media sources. Most media outlets will have general contact information you can find on their website and that's a good place to start. When reaching out to alternative media sources, like bloggers, podcasters and influencers, consider crafting personalized and concise pitches that highlight the relevance of your office's work to their audience. Email or direct messages on social media are usually most effective. Introduce yourself, briefly explain the unique aspects of your role and express your willingness to provide valuable insights or collaborate on content related to elections and civic engagement. Demonstrating an understanding of their content and audience may increase the likelihood of a positive response.

Depending on the size of your community and your local media outlets, they may have different levels of interest in news from your office. Some local media may be interested in news about personnel and promotions in your office, community events like voter registration opportunities and activities unique to your role as a local election official. In bigger communities, understand they might only be interested if there's a controversy or there's an election coming soon. Make sure that the editors or news managers know that if they ever have questions about local elections, you are willing to help. Even if your pitches don't result in stories, you will build goodwill. If something does go wrong in the future, positive relationships will increase the chances you will receive fair coverage.

How to Get Positive News Coverage

Positive stories about local elections can raise the public's trust in election integrity and help cushion the impact of unfounded rumors and incidents. The first step is identifying newsworthy election stories that will catch the interest of local reporters. Use these guidelines to measure the newsworthiness of your story idea:

- **Timeliness**: Does your story take place now or impact the near future?
- **Proximity**: Does your story affect people in your own backyard?
- **Prominence**: Are well-known people or institutions involved?

- **Conflict**: Are you taking a stand or covering a hot or controversial topic?
- **Impact**: Does your story shape your community's present or future in a significant way?
- **Humanity**: Does your story explore people in an interesting or emotional way?

If you meet three or more of the criteria above, you may have a story the media will want to cover.

Local Story Ideas

There are many positive stories you can share with your local community to help the public understand all the steps you take to make sure every election is fair, accurate, safe and secure.

Consider pitching one of these potential news stories to journalists in your community:

1. **Dedicated Volunteers** – Do you have poll workers who have served for many years or brand new poll workers, serving for the first time? Each person has a unique story to tell about why they choose to serve voters. Stories like this can also be a great recruiting tool if you need poll workers.

2. **Local Improvements** – If you have new voting equipment or have implemented a new process, now would be a good opportunity to talk with the local reporter about the steps you're taking to get ready for upcoming elections.

3. **Public Testing** – Do you conduct public pre-election logic and accuracy tests? Invite the media to come and see everything your office does to ensure accuracy and security. Media can reuse video footage and pictures they take of test ballots going into tabulators when they cover the election.

4. **Experienced Local Voters** – Do you know long-time voters who have never missed an election? If so, reach out and ask whether they would be willing to be interviewed for a feature story. This kind of feel-good story can help others see how important voting is and why everyone should participate.

5. **Common Questions** – What are the most common questions you get from citizens? You could offer to do a question and answer session for local media on topics related to upcoming elections. This is a great idea for local radio stations, especially if you can take live calls.

Customizable Response Tools

Ready to develop a pitch or news release? Use these customizable templates (based on the first three story ideas proposed above) to start promoting the positive election narratives happening in your community. The quotations in the sample news releases are suggestions only – use real quotes from the people involved.

Pitch Summaries

Dedicated Volunteers

Meet [name]. [First name] has been a volunteer poll worker in our community for [X] years. [Insert personal information about their family and where they worked in the community]. People like [first name] are so important to making sure our elections run smoothly. We'd like to introduce you to people like [first name] who help us do our best for you every day.

Local Improvements

This year many communities around [State] received grants to update computer systems and security, or are upgrading their voting equipment. Our community received [$XX] in grants to help us prepare for the 2024 election — and beyond. We'd love to share more information about the types of upgrades we invested in this year to make sure we're ready for the big election next year.

Public Testing and Observation

[State] law allows public observations of events such as testing the voting equipment, observing the Election Day process, and more. We'd like your help to alert the public that there are opportunities to observe in our community this year. This year, our community invites the public to be part of the process. Check with your clerk to find out when they will conduct the next public test in your municipality.

Press Release – Dedicated Volunteers

[Date]

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

CONTACT: [Insert name, phone and email for point person]

[Headline] [Full name] is ready for their [XX] election

[Subhead] With volunteers like [name], the 2024 election is in good hands

[Note: Include a photograph]

All politics are local. And each year, election officials in every community throughout [State] turn to volunteers like [name] to help them keep things running smoothly every election day.

"[First name] is such a wonderful volunteer," said [election clerk name/title]. "They always have a smile on their face and are ready to help in any way to make things easier for our community."

For [insert name], it's a wonderful way to give back to the community that has meant so much to them and their family. "We moved here [XX] years ago," they remember. "We raised our family here. So many people have helped us in many ways throughout the years, so we wanted to find ways to give back to the community. So when [insert name] asked me to help at the polls a few years ago, it was one small way I could give back to the community."

[Insert a paragraph about what they have done through the years—work, family, other volunteer activities.]

They note it has been fun watching the voters grow up, raise families of their own and catch up with old friends. "I look forward to each election," they continued. "In my own small way, I am making a difference for my community, and that feels great."

The next time you run into [name], say hi. They will likely remind you to be sure to vote in the next election (with a smile).

Sound interesting? Our community is always looking for poll workers like [name]. If that sounds like you, please contact [clerk's name].

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Press Release – Local Improvements

[Date]

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

CONTACT: [Insert name, phone and email for point person]

[Headline] [Community name] technology upgrades bring added security to the 2024 election

Our community is working closely with state officials to upgrade our equipment to add more security to our local election process.

Election security is more than a buzz word for clerks around [State]. It's a critical mission for each and every election. When the [State or entity] offered grants to help communities upgrade outdated electronics and improve security in advance of the 2024 election, [community] applied.

"Smaller communities like ours don't have significant resources to purchase and upgrade equipment," [election clerk name/title]. "We work incredibly hard to ensure our process is secure, but the opportunity to add a layer of security through new technology advances is now possible. And we're grateful for the help we are getting from [State or entity] to help us serve the community in more effective ways."

[Insert paragraph about new technology specifics.]

"While we don't know what other threats might lie ahead for the 2024 election, we do know that we have done everything we can to be ready for what's next," said [clerk name]. "If you're curious about the changes we've made, stop in and let us show you what's new—and why it matters."

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Press Release – Public Observation Opportunities

[Date]

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

CONTACT: [Insert name, phone and email for point person]

[Headline] We're looking for observers to participate in the 2024 election process

[Subhead] Curious about the equipment readiness? The process we plan to use? Or just want to be on hand for the actual election days?

Many people in our community have asked questions about whether we're ready for the 2024 election. In short, we are. But, the [election office name] wants you to know that you can observe all the steps we take to make sure our community is ready for what's to come in the upcoming election.

If you're interested in observing our community's readiness, here are some dates to jot down:

- Public test of voting equipment (within xx days of each election)
- Public observation of counting of votes after the polls close on Election Day

Check with your local clerk to find out when they conduct public tests in your municipality.

For more information on observing readiness in our community, visit [link to state or county election website].

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Section 2: Crisis Communications

A Speedy, Accurate Response is Critical When News Breaks

Emergency or breaking news situations often involve surprise, compounded by confusion and errors that occur during a response. While you can never truly control the narrative, quickly addressing the situation at hand can help calm things down.

When faced with a communications crisis, some remain silent because they fear saying the wrong thing will make things worse – or they are too busy dealing with the crisis itself. But failure to communicate in a timely and effective manner during a breaking news situation may lead to inaccurate information reaching the public. It may also cause the media and public to question your office's effectiveness.

Sometimes the inaccurate information that's circulating around a community or online can take on a life of its own. For instance, an online rumor claims that the voting machines your jurisdiction uses were hacked in another state. A local blogger or someone on social media reads about it and shares it with their followers, tagging your office's social media account. If you don't shut the rumor down quickly and authoritatively, it can spread and lead to uncertainty about the election process among your voters. Local news reporters may begin asking you about it, and suddenly, a rumor can become "fact" in the eyes of the public.

It's important to remember that not every problem rises to the level of a crisis. **While all crises are problems, few problems are crises.**

How to Recognize a Communications Crisis

If you answer "yes" to any of the following questions, you should consider it a crisis:

- Does it significantly impact local citizens' confidence in local elections?

- Does it affect your ability to run a safe and secure election in your community?

- Does it profoundly interrupt election operations? (Such as a natural disaster, like fire, power outage, flood, etc.)

If you have a crisis on your hands, make sure you can answer the following questions:

- What happened?

- What do we know?

- Who knows about the situation?

- What immediate operational steps need to be taken?

- Is the situation getting worse?

Once you have the answers, assess what you can and can't tell the public. It's important to know the answers before issuing any communications. You may also want to consult with your legal counsel if it's a serious situation. Within these constraints and understanding the importance of being accurate, aim to tell the public as much as you can as quickly as you can.

A Communication Rollout Checklist for Local Officials

Election problems that attract negative public attention can take many forms. Just a few examples:

- **Errors by an election office or vendor in preparing or counting ballots.**

  - Careless mistakes caused by election workers making simple mathematical errors, losing important papers or failing to meet deadlines.

  - Errors caused by external factors such as an election office being overwhelmed by unexpected high demand for a service like absentee voting during a pandemic or a sudden law change.

- **Cybersecurity problems or the perception of cyber vulnerability.**
  - Misinformation or disinformation about the security of election systems
  - Cyberattacks or voting system failures

- **Disruptive events:**
  - Natural disasters that can affect voting like hurricanes and earthquakes.
  - Human problems like train derailments and civil unrest.

Responding to these crisis communications situations often requires fast and sure-handed responses. Be prepared to brief primary and secondary supports of the situation, and to keep in mind your target audiences throughout any crisis.

Primary Supports

- **Election official**:
  - Assesses the situation and determines next steps

- **Employees and poll workers**:
  - Offer frontline support for any incident

- **IT support**:
  - On call to provide timely repairs if there is an incident

Secondary Supports

- **Local law enforcement**:
  - On call to provide security, if needed

- **Emergency Management and other local government officials**:
  - Can assist with notifications and support recovery efforts

- **Your state's chief elections official**:
  - Offers media support and can provide additional resources

Target Audiences

- **Cultivated media contacts**
- **Local media outlets**
- **General public**

Breakout: Getting Communications Support

Many election offices are too small to have a communications person or staff. However, when a crisis arises, there are a few places to look toward to provide valuable support.

Though your office may not have dedicated communications staff, your county may have a public information officer or communications director from whom you can likely receive support.

Additionally, look to your jurisdiction's Emergency Management department or agency, especially when it comes to dealing with natural disasters that can affect elections. These offices already have external communication tools that your office can use in the event of a crisis. If your office does not already have a working relationship with Emergency Management, consider establishing one.

Another good communications resource is your state's chief election official – Secretary of State or Elections Commission. If there's a problem in your jurisdiction, chances are the media is asking them about it, too, so it's in their interest to coordinate with you. Check with their communications office to see what assistance they may be able to provide in the event your office is overwhelmed in a crisis, especially when it comes to dealing with statewide or national news organizations.

Internal Communications Tools

When you are dealing with a communications crisis, it is critical for your office to speak with one voice. The last thing you need is to have someone on your staff or in your organization speaking out of turn. It is crucial that everyone on your staff or in your organization communicates effectively and in alignment with the team's goals. When people do not have clear direction or information, they may speculate, share unconfirmed information, or release facts that you are not ready to make public yet. That's why internal communications policies and tools are so important in a crisis. As part of your crisis communications plan, consider creating these internal communications tools.

Instructions for Staff to Escalate Problems to Leadership

Every frontline staff member in your office should have training and a document that directs them on what to do if they receive information about a potential crisis situation. That information could come from someone walking into your office, calling on the phone, mailing or emailing. It could come from something a staff member hears at a local coffee shop. These instructions are especially important if your office hires temporary workers around election time. You do not want critical information sitting on someone's desk because they did not realize its importance.

Likewise, managers and supervisors need to know what to do when issues are escalated to them, and when to bring them to the attention of leadership.

Brief Holding Statements for Staff

At the start of a crisis, your office may need to say something before you are ready to release a full response. That's when you issue a brief holding statement. Holding statements are pre-prepared statements that can be adapted and released in a short period of time, even if all of the information isn't available. Your holding statement should acknowledge the issue, let everyone know you are working on it, and indicate that you will release more information as soon as you can. Sometimes you may wait to issue a holding statement until the media or the public start calling with questions. At other times, you may need to issue a holding statement to make everyone aware of a crisis before you are ready to release specific details.

A holding statement could be:

"We are aware of the reported issues regarding [issue at hand]. Our top priority is ensuring the integrity of elections and the accuracy of the results. We are actively investigating the matter and will provide a comprehensive update as soon as we have more information. Rest assured, we are committed to transparency and fairness in the election. Thank you for your patience".

Every frontline staff member should have a document containing brief sample holding statements. Staff can use them when responding to unofficial requests for information from the public, such as incoming calls to a public hotline. Think about how you would want staff to respond to a range of potential complaints that an elections office might receive, including:

- Difficulty registering to vote
- Long lines at polling places
- Voting equipment problems
- Lost absentee ballot mailings
- Being turned away at a polling place

Not all of these situations may be a crisis – some could be normal problems you solve every election – but how your staff responds (or doesn't respond) to an upset caller or a reporter could determine whether they escalate into a crisis.

Learn more about holding statements in External Communications Tools (page 22).

Contact Lists – Primary and Secondary Supports

When a crisis happens, you won't have time to search for phone numbers. Create a contact list document you can get to easily – have copies on your phone and office computer. Print out copies as well. It should include the following:

- individual's role,
- cell phone,
- home phone
- email.

You should also have a contact list for any secondary resources – people whose help you may need to respond or inform about a crisis situation. Review and update these lists regularly.

Your list should be divided into two groups:

- **Primary Supports** – individuals who need to be informed of what's happening and what is being done to resolve the issue when a crisis occurs.

- **Secondary Supports** – people who can provide additional communications resources and support, public safety assistance and more. Remember to include contacts at different levels of government, from municipal and county resources to state and federal contacts.

Continuity Plans and Emergency Procedures

Your internal crisis communications plan should also include your office's continuity of operations plans and emergency procedures. If you do not have these plans, you can find The Elections Group's guides to developing them on our website.

Internal Office Briefing Plans

How will you inform staff about a crisis communications situation? Can you quickly call an all-hands staff meeting? Would an all-staff email be more effective? It may depend upon the situation. Key points:

- In any communication, be direct and succinct.

- In any all-hands meeting, tell them the basics of what you know about the situation, but do not speculate about facts you may not know yet.

- Ensure that everyone knows the plan for who makes decisions and any other emergency procedures.

- Tell them who on your staff will be in charge of investigating the issue in the event they have relevant information.

- Remind everyone who will be handling any calls from news media or elected officials/VIPs.

- Be prepared to give them a short holding statement (a few short sentences) they can provide in the event they get questions from the public.

Holding statements should:

- Make clear that your office:
    - Is aware of an issue
    - Takes the issue seriously
    - Is working to resolve it
- Promise to provide more information as it becomes available.

Stakeholders Briefing Plans

Depending on the severity of the crisis, you may need to reach out to certain internal and external stakeholders. These include elected officials, administrators and other department heads in your government organization, legal counsel, law enforcement, emergency management, your state's chief election official and partners such as voting equipment and supply vendors.

Points to consider when you share information about the crisis:

- Is it possible to convene a meeting quickly?
- Who should call the meeting – you, an elected leader or an administrator? (Remember that when dealing with groups of elected leaders like county boards and city councils, you must be careful not to violate any open meetings laws.)
- Would it be better to brief stakeholders individually by phone? Do you have the time for individual phone calls?
- Could you brief them in an email? How would they react to an email instead of a meeting or a phone call?
- Remember that whatever information you provide could quickly become public in the event someone decides to share it outside your government organization.
- Share the holding statement you have provided your staff.

Elected officials and others may want to jump ahead of the known facts to their own questions about how or why the crisis happened – and who is responsible. Even in the face of pressure from elected officials, resist the urge to jump to conclusions when you do not have all of the facts. Be direct, succinct and fact-based in your responses.

Remind them that you are following a crisis communications plan which counsels you not to speculate. Assume that anything you tell them may be repeated to a reporter or shared with other officials.

Delegating Responsibilities

Designate a Record-Keeper

If your office has the resources, an internal communications plan should designate a trusted staff person tasked with keeping records of everything that happens during the crisis. That includes notes from briefings and staff meetings.

Designate a Back-Up Media Contact

Depending on the size of your office, you may not have a public information officer or other team member who routinely deals with the news media. If your office is small, you may be the only person authorized to speak to the media. That may work when reporters call infrequently, but not in a communications crisis.

You will need someone who can respond to inquiries quickly in a crisis. This is true even if that person is just passing along holding statements or releasing details about a news conference. Things rarely turn out well when media calls go unanswered or reporters are told no one can talk to them except the head of the election office, and that person is unavailable because they are dealing with the crisis. When that happens, reporters go looking for other sources of information. Those alternate sources may not know what is really happening, and may speculate or provide misinformation.

If your jurisdiction has a communications office, talk to them about using their resources in the event of a communications crisis. It will be much easier to have a plan in place beforehand than to try to wrangle media relations resources at the last minute.

External Communications Tools

External communication tools help election offices relay updates in a crisis and can help shape public opinion, trust and confidence. They help spread information quickly to a wide and diverse audience and dispel misinformation that threatens the voting and elections processes.

These include:

- **Holding Statements** – Brief messages acknowledging your office is aware of a problem, is working to address it and will provide more information to the public as soon as it is available.

- **Media Advisories** – Short news releases letting the media know the "who, what, when, where and why" about an upcoming news event, such as a news conference.

- **News Releases** – Communications to the media and the public written in the form of news articles providing timely information about problems, including quotations from officials.

- **News Conference Plans** – A document your staff can use to set up a meeting room or other venue to host a media event on short notice.

- **Text Messages or Emergency Alert Notifications** – Short messages for use if your organization has access to a texting system.

- **Social Media Posts** – Short messages with links to your website, often accompanied by graphics or short videos.

Many of these tools can be used in combination. For example, your first move in a communications crisis may be posting a holding statement to your website, emailing it to local news organizations and posting it to your social media accounts.

When more information is available, send out a media advisory to news media organizations letting them know you are holding a news conference. Also post it on your website and share it on social media.

Prepare a news release for the news conference. Provide the most important, relevant facts in the first paragraph and details farther down the page. Focus on what happened and what your office is doing to address any problems. Include quotes from the head of the election office and possibly other officials.

(If you are not holding a news conference, you can prepare and send a news release directly to media organizations on your distribution list.)

At the news conference, hand the news release out to reporters who attend. Email it afterwards to everyone on your media list, including those who attended. Even if they have a paper copy, having an electronic copy when they return to their offices will allow reporters to copy and paste text from your news release directly into their stories.

During the news conference, do not read directly from the news release. Work with your staff to outline talking points or a short script. If you will be calling on subject matter experts or elected officials to speak, make sure they have their talking points as well.

Have someone from your staff take video of the news conference with their cell phone so you can review your performance later. You may also be able to use short video clips on social media.

Take questions from reporters but be prepared for curveballs. Remember, reporters are not election experts, and may ask questions based on speculation or misinformation they are trying to verify. If you have time before your news conference, have a few trusted staff members ask you tough questions to prepare you.

Don't set an arbitrary time limit on questions or for the news conference itself. If you have other pressing meetings to attend, leave when you must. But if you have time to talk with reporters and do brief "one-on-one" stand-up interviews, take the opportunity. It helps build rapport and gives you even more opportunities to deliver your message.

But if things do get out of hand, have your back-up media person prepared to intervene and say you are out of time, or you have time for one more question.

Best Practices for Communicating During a Crisis

- **Be transparent, but careful.**
    - Transparent communication builds trust, but in a situation that has electoral implications, you may not have all the facts at hand at the time a situation breaks.
    - Public comments should demonstrate that you are taking the issue seriously but avoid providing any details

that may change as the investigation progresses, so you don't have to correct yourself down the line.

- Avoid speculation.

- **Focus on actions you are taking to address the issue.**
  - Talk about the steps you are taking to fix the problem once you have more information about the incident.
  - If there are steps for the public to take, communicate them clearly and succinctly.

- **In an election security situation, there will be a temptation for the public rumor mill to run rampant.**
  - Stick to the facts
  - Provide context to reduce the risk of undermining public trust.

- **If you can, try to provide visual aids.**
  - Many typical election problems are technical and most people (including local journalists) have little to no context for technical issues.
  - The quickest way to get your message out is to add something visual (a graphic, photo or map).
  - If it's a problem with a ballot, enlarge it to poster size.

- **Focus on any contingency plans that are already in place.**
  - If your county uses a voting system that counts votes on paper ballots, emphasize that they can be hand counted if problems arise with the machines.

- **Review and use the communication tools in this toolkit.**
  - Traditional media outlets (newspapers, radio and television) are no longer the only ways to spread the word about a situation. Social media can be a vehicle for dispelling rumors and updating your community with the latest details about an incident, but be prepared for unfriendly replies. You do not need to respond to all of them.
  - For some situations, you'll need multiple communication tools to reach key audiences quickly. For others, you may only need to post something on your website.

- **Once the situation is cleared up, take some time to evaluate your response.**
  - Use the opportunity to improve your election messages for the future.

Section 3: After the Crisis – Best Practices

What do you do after you've managed a communications crisis? It can take time for things to return to normal after an election integrity situation. Don't let your guard down – stay engaged with your media contacts — and the general public — in the days that follow. Continue to monitor the situation and be ready for the conversation to resurface.

Once you have declared an end to your communication crisis, these best practices can help your crisis response team analyze your efforts and identify areas for improvement.

Update Audiences Over Time

Follow up with your community after a crisis, especially with those directly affected. Keep the media informed of any updates in the situation. Make sure to let everyone know the crisis has ended.

Keep Records

Keep records of the social posts, news reports and other communications shared with the general public before, during and after the crisis. You should also keep copies of all related internal and outgoing communications, from memos and emails to news releases and interview footage. This will allow your team to track the course of the story later on, and properly evaluate the quality and effectiveness of your response.

Also collect feedback from external audiences, which will let an election office know if the crisis communications strategy was successful and whether something needs to be clarified or emphasized. Feedback can come in from a variety of channels, including email, social media, phone calls, political parties or from other government agencies.

This information may also serve as an important record for your legal counsel, your state's chief election official and other advisors.

Assess Your Response

Hold a formal post-crisis analysis of your response with your crisis communications team. Use this process to analyze:

- The timeliness of your response,
- How effectively your message was understood and spread,
- Which media outlets engaged with your team,
- The quality of media coverage, before and after your response and
- The situation's impact on your reputation or elections.

Next, review your internal policies and make adjustments to help you prepare for any similar communications crises in the future and improve on your response. Proper analysis provides an elections office with a better view of what needs to happen to be responsive to voters, build trust and confidence in the voting and election process and reduce voter support cases.

Reset for Success

Each crisis situation is an opportunity to learn and prepare for what's next. Take a look at your communication tools to make sure you're ready for any future crisis situation.

- Do you need to adjust your templates?
- Is your phone tree current?
- Do you have back-up people trained to step in if someone is out of the office?
- Is your media list current?

Section 4: Sample Crisis Communications Scenarios and Recommended Responses

Scenario 1: Voting Equipment and Supply Problems

Background

It is not uncommon for voting equipment to break, ballots to jam and systems to fail. Even if you have back-ups ready in the event of failure, any delay or problem at a polling place has the potential to attract negative news coverage quickly, especially in this age of social media.

Scenario

Shortly after the polls open, your office receives reports from one polling place that the electronic tabulator will not accept voted ballots. Poll workers follow protocol and direct voters to place their ballots into an auxiliary ballot bin to be counted later. Most voters comply, but a few are skeptical. Your office sends a technician to the polling place with a back-up tabulator.

Communications Goals

Assure voters that even if their ballots cannot be placed in a tabulator immediately, their ballots are secure in the auxiliary bin and will be counted accurately.

How to Respond:

Step 1: You don't need to activate a crisis team, but you should inform your key staff members and organizational leaders so everyone hears the same information.

Step 2: Prepare a holding statement to be used only if someone in the media contacts you about the issue.

- If you issue a statement to a member of the press, post the same information on your website and social media accounts.

Step 3: Monitor media and social media sites for stories and posts about the situation. If the situation escalates, you may need to take further action to reduce the possibility of rumors.

Situation Escalates

The technician arrives at the polling place and tries the new tabulator, but test ballots continue to jam. The polling place's ballots appear to have been exposed to moisture and expanded beyond the tabulator's tolerances. A few voters start posting about the problem on social media, and their messages are reposted by a statewide political organization, which calls for an investigation and urges voters to refuse to use the auxiliary ballot bins and not to leave the polling place until they can use the tabulator. Calls about the problem start coming into the central office.

How to Respond

Step 1: Activate your internal crisis response team.

- Hold internal meetings to ensure that everyone hears the information directly from you and emphasize that all communications must come from the organization's spokesperson, who could be the clerk, an elected official or a public information officer.

- Amend the previous holding statement for your frontline staff and poll workers if they receive questions from the public.

- When plans are in place, provide talking points so they can explain why voters can trust that their ballots will be counted accurately when they use the auxiliary ballot bin. It may also be beneficial to provide instructional flyers to voters explaining the process and ensuring that their vote will count.

Step 2: Prepare materials for the media.

- Do your best to provide the media with a holding statement as quickly as possible after learning about the escalation. Share the holding statement on social media quickly as well – the sooner you make a statement, the more likely you'll be able to manage the narrative.

- Use the holding statement template in this toolkit to help you get one out quickly.

- Post the holding statement on your website as well.

Step 3: Prepare additional materials for the media, as needed.

- Modify the draft press release in this toolkit to address the specifics of the ballot issue.

- It may be necessary to meet with the local media to make sure they get all the facts about the ballot issue from you.

- Update the media with any additional information you receive about the situation.

Step 4: Monitor local media and social media reports and correct any misinformation about the incident.

- Update information on the website and social media sites to keep the public informed.

- Call local editors and reporters to share what you know about the situation.

- Reassure everyone that all ballots will be counted accurately, and everything is secure.

Step 5: When the incident is resolved, assess how your team performed in a crisis situation.

- Each crisis is an opportunity to learn more about how to address future issues.

- Take some time to talk with your team about what they learned and what they might do differently if a similar crisis takes place in the future.

Additional Strategic Considerations:

- Be completely transparent with your community. Communication and immediacy are imperative to mitigating the damage.

Customizable Response Tools

Holding Statement

"Today we discovered a problem with ballots at [NAME OF PRECINCT] which prevented them from being scanned by the electronic voting equipment. There have been unfounded rumors that these ballots will not be counted if they are not inserted directly into the tabulators by voters. These reports are not true. All ballots are always counted. We have poll workers and election observers from both political parties at the polling place to ensure every vote is counted accurately."

Press Release

[Date]

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

CONTACT: [Insert name, phone and email for point person]

[Headline] Malfunction Impacts Ballots in [Community]

[Municipality, State]—[Community] Clerk [name] said today [they] received information this morning that voting equipment in our community experienced a malfunction.

[Insert specific, factual information about the problem.]

"Unfortunately, we experienced a problem with voting equipment and ballots today," said [name]. "We are working on a solution, and have back-up plans in place to ensure every vote is counted accurately. While we don't have all the information about the problem that took place, we are working with vendors to assess the problem."

"We will provide additional information as it becomes available," said [name].

If you have additional questions, feel free to contact
[name and phone/email] or go to [URL].

###

Talking Points

- Our voting equipment [or exact terms] experienced a malfunction due to a human error, and was not the target of a cyberattack.

- We are working with our vendor and state voting equipment experts to assess the situation.

- We will provide additional information as it becomes available.

- Every ballot cast in [State] is either on paper or has a paper back-up, and can be counted independently of electronic tabulators. We have many back-up procedures to ensure that election results will not be impacted by this malfunction.

Social Media Posts

- Today, we learned [community]'s voting equipment has malfunctioned. For the latest developments, visit [URL].

- We're working closely with our vendor and state election officials to fix the problem. Find out how at [URL].

- [Community]'s recent voting machine malfunction will not affect residents' ability to vote, but election results may be delayed. Visit [URL] to learn more.

Spokesperson Questions and Answers

Question	Answer
Which voting machines or polling places were affected?	We are still investigating to assess what equipment may have malfunctioned. We will share more information as it becomes available.
What level of elections are affected?	The integrity of all election systems is important. When we have more information about the exact nature of the problem, we will share that with you and the community.
Where are the voting machines stored?	Our voting equipment is stored in [general location].
Who's responsible for the malfunction?	We are working with experts to determine what caused the problem.
How many voters may be affected by the malfunction?	We are in the early stages of the investigation. We will share that information when it becomes available.
Have you alerted the [state's chief election official]? Are they able to help solve the problem?	We are working with [organization names]. When they reach a conclusion, we will share it with our community.
If the suspects are employees or former employees, what can you share? Were full and complete background checks done on them? Were there previous disciplinary problems or any previous indications of trouble?	We don't have any suspects at this time. *Note: Do not offer individual's names.*
What steps were taken to test the voting machines before the election? What is being done to make sure remaining machines don't experience the same problems?	[State] requires all voting equipment to be publicly tested before each election. All the voting equipment in our community worked during the tests. We are working with the vendor, the and the state to better understand what may have happened.

Scenario 2: Election Office Errors

Background

Despite everything you and your staff do to maintain accurate voter lists, proofread ballots and train poll workers, people make mistakes. A candidate's name can be misspelled or left off of the ballot. Problems with the poll book can force voters to cast provisional ballots. Things can turn ugly fast, especially if those affected suspect ulterior motives.

Scenario

Half an hour after the polls open, your office receives a report from one polling place that the ballots for a highly contentious local school board race say "Vote for Two" candidates instead of "Vote for Three" candidates, as there are three open seats. Twenty-three voters have already cast ballots. You quickly discover the same problem in six other polling places in that school district. One of the candidates takes to social media, claiming someone is trying to prevent his entire slate of candidates from winning.

Communications Goals

Accurately communicate the ballot error's impact and reduce the chance of rumors making the situation worse.

How to Respond:

Step 1: Activate your internal crisis response team.

- Hold internal meetings to ensure that everyone hears the information directly from you and emphasize that all communications must come from the organization's spokesperson, who could be the clerk, an elected official or a public information officer.

- Provide talking points for your frontline staff and poll workers if they receive questions from the public.

Step 2: Prepare materials for the media.

- Do your best to provide the media with a holding statement within one hour of learning there is a problem. Social

media in the community will likely begin to spread the news quickly, so the sooner you make a statement, the more likely you'll be able to manage the narrative.

- Use the holding statement template in this toolkit to help you get one out quickly.

- Post the holding statement on your website and your social media sites.

Step 3: Prepare additional materials for the media, as needed.

- Modify the draft press release in this toolkit to address the specifics of the problem that has occurred.

- It may be necessary to meet with the local media to make sure they get all the facts about the problem from you.

- Update the media with any additional information you receive from the state about the problem.

Step 4: Monitor local media and social media reports and correct misinformation about the problem.

- Update information on the website and social media sites to keep the public informed about the problem.

Step 5: When the problem is resolved, assess how your team performed in a crisis situation.

- Each crisis is an opportunity to learn more about how to address future issues.

- Take some time to talk with your team about what they learned and what they might do differently if another crisis takes place in the future.

Additional Strategic Considerations:

- Be completely transparent with your community. Communication and immediacy are important to mitigating the damage.

- Make sure communications are posted prominently, where people who live in the community will see them.

- Restore trust by communicating measures being taken to prevent a future problem.

Customizable Response Tools

Holding Statement

"Today we learned that there is a problem with ballot instructions for the school board election in [insert school district name]. We are working with our ballot printer and consulting with the [state chief election official's office] to assess the extent of the misprint — and how serious it might be. Fortunately, we have back-up plans in place and will take whatever steps are necessary to ensure that every vote is counted accurately. Voters should continue to cast their ballots. We will provide you with more information as soon as it becomes available."

Press Release

[Date]

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

CONTACT: [Insert name, phone and email for point person

[Headline] Ballot Misprint Impacts School Board Election in [Community]

[Municipality, State]—[County] Clerk [name] said today [they] received information this morning [Insert specific, factual information about the misprint.]

"Unfortunately, we experienced a problem with ballots today," said [name]. "We have instructed poll workers to inform every voter they can vote for three candidates in the school board race. While we don't have all the information about how the problem happened, we are working with [names of school officials] and other state officials to understand what happened."

"We will provide additional information as it becomes available," said [name].

If you have additional questions, feel free to contact
[name and phone/email] or go to [URL].

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Talking Points

- Our ballots for [school district] experienced a misprint.

- We are working with our printing vendor to assess the situation.

- We will provide additional information as it becomes available.

- We have many back-up procedures to minimize the impact of this misprint.

Spokesperson Questions and Answers

Question	Answer
Which polling places were affected?	We are still determining which polling places received misprinted ballots. We will share more information as it becomes available.
What level of elections are affected?	Only the school board race in [district name]. Elections for city and county offices were not affected.
Who printed the ballots?	Our ballot printing vendor is [name].
Who's responsible for proofreading ballots?	There are many steps involved in creating, printing and proofing ballots. We are working on correcting the problem today on Election Day, but will conduct a full review of the process afterward to determine where the error was missed.
Was this intentional, as one of the candidates has claimed, to keep his entire slate of candidates from winning and taking control of the school board?	No. This was likely a human error. After the election we will fully investigate what happened. But I can assure you that no one on our staff would do something like this intentionally.

Scenario 3: Election Security Rumors

Background

The fact that modern voting systems are generally secure has not stopped conspiracy theorists from posting wild theories about election manipulation by foreign nations or other bad actors. If there are rumors that the voting system your county uses was hacked somewhere else, online activists, news media or supporters of a losing candidate could start asking questions or making accusations about your office. Misinformation can spread quickly, especially when it appears to come from a credible source. Learn how to handle speculation and unconfirmed reports about your community's election security.

Scenario

You are notified that your county has received a "failing grade" in an online report about election security vulnerabilities because of the voting equipment vendor you use.

Communications Goal:

Correct misinformation before it can spread.

How to Respond:

Step 1: You don't need to activate a crisis team because this scenario does not constitute a crisis as discussed above.

- However, you should inform your key staff members and organizational leaders so everyone hears the same information. Also, please notify your state's chief election official's office.

Step 2: Prepare a holding statement to be used only if someone in the media contacts you about the issue.

- If you issue a statement to the press, post the same information on your website and social media sites.

Step 3: Monitor media and social media reports and correct misinformation about the situation. If the situation escalates, you may need to take further action to reduce the possibility of rumors.

- If there is an escalation, call the local editor/reporter and share what you know about the situation.

- Reassure everyone that no attempt to infiltrate your systems was made and everything is secure.

- Post any updates on your website and social media sites.

Step 4: Consider activating your proactive media relations plan.

- Sharing positive stories about your state and local office's election security measures can buoy public trust and can help cushion the impact of unfounded rumors and election security situations.

Customizable Response Tools

Holding Statement

"Today we discovered there are reports circulating that [Name] County's election system is not secure. We can categorically tell you that these reports are not true. We have cybersecurity experts who continually monitor our election systems. It's business as usual for our employees — and election officials around the state who are busy preparing for the next round of elections."

Press Release

[Date]

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

CONTACT: [Insert name, phone and email for point person]

[State] Officials Report All Systems are Go for Upcoming Election

Clerk says rumors circulating about issues in [State] are unfounded

[Municipality], State]—[Community] leaders today reassured the public that reports about election security in [state or county] are false. Further, they want to make sure that everyone in [state] is doing everything possible to ensure a safe, secure election.

"Some of you may have heard a rumor about election issues in [State]," said [clerk name/title]. "We received calls from the media inquiring about our systems. We told them — and are telling you — that there is no truth to those claims and all systems are operating as they should for our upcoming election."

Rumors arise during every election season and it's important for everyone to know that the [state chief election official's office] and your local officials are here to help answer any questions you may have.

[Insert quote from state election official, if needed.]

"We can assure you that the security systems we have in [Name] County are working and we are ready for the upcoming election," said [name].

If you have additional questions, feel free to contact [name and phone/email] or go to [URL].

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Talking Points

- Our community's election infrastructure is secure.
- The rumors that are circulating online about vulnerabilities in our county's election system are completely false.
- [State] election officials have dedicated significant resources to make sure our election infrastructure is safe.
- Please let us know if you have any questions.

Spokesperson Questions and Answers

Question	Answer
Is it true that [rumor details] impacted election data in [state]?	No. There is no truth to that rumor. [State election official] has been in contact with them and they assured us that their systems are secure.
How would you know if someone had hacked the servers?	We have alert systems in place to notify us of any abnormalities. This is something we take very seriously and are diligent in ensuring we are doing everything we can to protect the data.
Is it possible for someone to manipulate the data without their knowledge?	No. All security features provide us with ongoing reports about the system. If there were any abnormalities, we would receive a notification.
If the system was breached, what do we do?	First, let me assure you the system was not breached. If something abnormal occurs, we are ready to activate operational responses to ensure the core system remains protected at all times.
Have other state systems been attacked?	[State or county] was not attacked. We can't speak on behalf of other states' systems.
If systems were hacked in [previous election], how are you confident it can't happen again?	First let me put one rumor to rest. While there were questions about voting equipment in [state] in [year], there is no evidence it was hacked or malfunctioned. Our system is safe because of our strong security system. While we can't predict the future, we know that we're doing everything we possibly can to prepare for what's next.
On a scale of 1–10, how confident are you that [state] won't be hacked in the next election?	We are very confident that we have secure systems and processes in place to protect our systems in upcoming elections and beyond.
Do you think other states will have problems in future elections?	We are focusing on the elections in our community.
Are there more things states can do to protect election data for upcoming elections?	Like [state], many states have put systems and security features in place to protect election data for the upcoming elections and beyond. As new technologies become available, we will all look at them to assess the value for all communities around the United States.

Social Media Posts

- Fact check: There are no security issues with [Name] County voting equipment. Our systems are secure.

- We are happy to report there are NO problems with our local election system or anywhere in [state].

- Spread the word.

Scenario 4: Severe Weather Event

Background

In states with early spring primaries and elections, weather can sometimes be a factor. Blizzards, ice storms and flooding can delay or prevent opening the polls, getting to the polls, keeping the polls open and returning results back to the elections office. Even an isolated lightning strike or a roof leak at a polling place the night before an election could damage electronic voting equipment or ballots. You may need to communicate in advance about contingency preparations for a predicted storm, or you may have to send out alerts in the event unexpected severe weather strikes.

Scenario

Unexpectedly heavy overnight rains early on Election Day cause flash flooding your county, cutting off public access to several polling places. You must move those polling places to new locations and inform voters of where they can now vote.

Communications Goals

Accurately communicate the storm's impact on the election and inform voters in affected areas where they can cast their ballots.

How to Respond

Step 1: Activate your internal crisis response team.

- Hold internal meetings to ensure that everyone hears the information directly from you and emphasize that all communications must come from the organization's spokesperson, who could be the clerk, an elected official or a public information officer.

- Provide a holding statement for your frontline staff and poll workers if they receive questions from the public before a plan to move polling places is ready.

- When plans are in place, provide talking points so they can explain where voters need to go to cast their ballots.

Step 2: Coordinate with Emergency Management and Law Enforcement

- Because the crisis involves other local and possibly state and federal agencies, you will want to coordinate communications efforts to advise the public about the flooding.

- Instead of holding your own media event, you may be able to attend and speak at a news conference organized by your jurisdiction.

- You may be able to provide information about voting contingencies to be included in a larger local government news release. However, you should still plan to issue your own news releases.

Step 3: Prepare materials for the media.

- Do your best to provide the media with a holding statement within one hour of learning there is an incident. Social media in the community will likely begin to spread the news quickly, so the sooner you make a statement, the more likely you'll be able to manage the narrative.

- Use the holding statement template in this toolkit to help you get one out quickly.

- Post the holding statement on your website and your social media sites.

- If needed, prepare additional materials for the media:

    - Modify the draft press release in this toolkit to address the specifics of the poll closures.

    - It may be necessary to meet with the local media to make sure they get all the facts about the poll closings from you.

    - Update the media with any additional information you receive about the incident, including whether voting hours could be extended by a court.

Step 4: Monitor local media and social media reports and correct any misinformation about the incident.

- Update information on the website and social media sites to keep the public informed.

Step 5: When the incident is resolved, assess how your team performed in a crisis situation.

- Each crisis is an opportunity to learn more about how to address future issues.

- Take some time to talk with your team about what they learned and what they might do differently if a similar crisis takes place in the future.

Additional Strategic Considerations:

- Be completely transparent with your community. Communication and immediacy are important to mitigating the damage.

- Make sure communications are posted prominently, where people who live in the community will see them.

Customizable Response Tools

Holding Statement

"[Name] County Emergency Management has advised the [Name] County Board of Elections that overnight flash flooding has made some roads impassable in southeast [Name] County today, forcing us to relocate several polling places. We are working on new locations and will announce them as soon as they are confirmed."

Press Release

[Date]

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

CONTACT: [Insert name, phone and email for point person]

Flash Flooding Impacts Voting in [Community]

[Municipality, State]—Three polling places in [Name] County have been relocated due to flash flooding, Clerk [name] announced.

[Insert specific, factual information about the relocations.]

"We are grateful for the assistance of [Name] County Sheriff and Emergency Management in finding new locations for the three polling places," said [name].

"We will provide additional information as it becomes available," said [name].

Because of delays in opening the relocated polling places, polls will be open an additional hour until [X] p.m., by order of [name of judge or court].

If you have additional questions, feel free to contact
[name and phone/email] or go to [URL].

Talking Points

- Flash flooding has made three polling places inaccessible.
- New voting locations are [list places].
- [Name] County Elections worked closely with the sheriff's office and Emergency Management to find new locations and safely move voting equipment and supplies.
- Voters with questions about where to vote should call
  [phone number] for detailed information.
- Polls in affected locations will be open an additional
  hour because of delays in opening.