

Guidance for Religious Leaders at the Polls

Religious leaders across the country are lifting their voices to call for a free, fair, and peaceful election season. Many of them are preparing to serve as “poll chaplains” or “peacekeepers” at polling locations – ensuring a safe, positive experience for voters, and to advocate for a free, fair, and safe election. These volunteers help to ensure that eligible voters are able to cast their ballots without fear and without interruption, and they are trained in de-escalation techniques to diffuse potential tense situations that may arise at polling locations. The relationships between peacekeepers and law enforcement can be complicated, and every community is different. This document seeks to provide concrete guidance for how religious leaders can coordinate effectively with law enforcement to ensure that voters are safe when they cast their votes this fall.

Coordinate with law enforcement and election officials beforehand

Faith-based efforts to support our elections are most effective if coordinated with local leaders, including election officials and law enforcement. In addition to reaching out to election officials, faith leaders should reach out to law enforcement in the following ways:

- Check if your local police have a chaplain with whom you can collaborate.
- Contact local law enforcement to share your contact information and plans, and learn the best way to communicate with them ahead of time.
- Schedule a meeting with law enforcement to talk about specific concerns you have about safety in your community, and offer ways to help.
- Communicate directly to law enforcement about concerns you have about their role in responding to potential challenges.

Help to ensure coordination between law enforcement and election officials (EOs)

Religious leaders have a unique role in local communities and can speak credibly to law enforcement and election officials. Many organizations have worked hard in recent years to increase collaboration between law enforcement and election officials to ensure law enforcement takes threats to election officials, their families, and facilities seriously and prioritizes protecting both. Significant progress has been made but there is still work to do, and faith leaders can help fill this gap by encouraging and facilitate such coordination.

- Religious leaders should engage local police chaplains and other law enforcement officials to highlight the threat to EOs, their families and facilities, and respectfully but firmly encourage them to immediately engage election officials to discuss security if they have not already done so.
- Similarly, faith leaders should engage election officials to encourage them to coordinate with law enforcement if they have not done so and ask how they might facilitate such conversations and planning.
- Religious leaders can share and encourage both groups to use CSSE’s Five Steps to guide their discussions and planning.

The role of religious leaders in keeping the peace at polling locations

For a variety of reasons, it is preferable that a peaceful environment be maintained at polling locations without requiring a heavy security presence. Trusted community leaders such as religious officials can play an important role by providing a positive presence at polling locations and leading de-escalation efforts if tensions rise. While many EOs undergo de-escalation training, having well-trained outside leaders as another line of assistance can make a positive difference.

In order to provide a peaceful presence at polling locations, groups should seek guidance from their election officials regarding the statutes and rules at their polling locations. Election officials are often the final arbiter of what is allowed at individual locations, and groups should generally follow their instructions.

Five Steps to De-Escalation

De-Escalation from well-trained, non-law enforcement, trusted community leaders can be helpful to ensure peace at polling locations. Some best practices of de-escalation include:



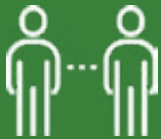
REMAIN CALM

Purposefully demonstrate calmness and composure.



CHANGE THE SETTING

If possible, remove people from the area. This could involve parties to the conflict and onlookers.



RESPECT PERSONAL SPACE

Maintain a safe distance and avoid touching the other person.



LISTEN

Give your full attention, nod and ask questions, and avoid changing the subject or interrupting.



EMPATHIZE

Present genuine concern and a willingness to understand without judging.

DID YOU KNOW?

The Basics on the Role of Law Enforcement at Polling Locations

In many states and jurisdictions, law enforcement officers are banned from being stationed at or near polls or are subject to significant restrictions there unless they are responding to specific call for assistance or a reported criminal act.

Where officers are present, they have to be extremely careful because much can be read into their presence or actions.

When called to or stationed at polling locations, officers are encouraged to practice de-escalation whenever possible and to utilize a community policing/problem solving approach. It is recommended that officers also engage with those in charge of that election site to assure that their actions are supporting the work of elections officials at those locations.

