

Preparing for federal agents or ICE at a polling place



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Center for Civic Design | Public Rights Project

Are you ready to train election workers for the possibility that federal agents, including ICE, may enter a polling place?

The goal is for workers to be ready to address any incident calmly, quietly, and effectively...allowing voting to continue safely.

This guidance is an extension of your general planning to keep workers, voters, and election materials, such as ballots, safe in an emergency.

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This tool was made by the **Center for Civic Design** and **Public Rights Project**, with help from **Election Security Exchange, The Election Group**, and other election and security experts.

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Who is allowed in a voting location

Jurisdiction	Laws and rules
Federal laws	Federal laws prohibit federal agents from being present at election sites (including voting locations, offices, and drop boxes). It is illegal: • To station “troops or armed men” where elections are held. <i>18 U.S.C. §592</i> • For members of the military to interfere with elections. <i>18 U.S.C. §593</i> • For civilian federal employees to use their position to interfere in elections <i>18 U.S.C. §595</i> • For anyone to intimidate someone aiding a voter, including election workers <i>52 U.S.C. §20511</i> • For anyone to conspire to intimidate anyone exercising their constitutional rights, including voting. <i>18 U.S.C. §24</i>
State laws	State laws also set rules for who is allowed in a voting location or a polling place while voting is taking place. This includes official observers, candidates, official Department of Justice election monitors, and local law enforcement officers. State law or election code also sets the distance from a polling place designated as a safety zone and what activities are not permitted. These might include: • Violent behavior in or around a voting location • Disrupting voting lines or blocking the entrance • Following or harassing voters • Aggressively questioning voters • Brandishing firearms or an intimidating display of firearms • Approaching voter vehicles or writing down license plate numbers
Local laws	The organization of local government and your coordination planning with law enforcement and first responder organizations may affect your response plans and signage you need in polling places.

Preparing a response plan

You already have procedures for emergency response. Start with your basic procedures and build on that training for this specific situation.

One of your goals is to avoid putting a poll worker in the position of standing between an armed agent and the voting equipment or voters.

Use the guidance and “scripts” in this document to help pollworkers create a “pause” early in an incident, so they can gather basic information, communicate with you, and let someone from your office or law enforcement handle the situation.

Topic	What to include in your plan
Plan your coordination with local law enforcement	Make sure all agencies are aware of the federal and state laws. • Decide on a response plan, including communication channels for both workers at a voting location and your office. • Create a contact list, both for your office and anything election workers need to know to say or who to ask for. • Decide on guidelines for election workers about when to call law enforcement directly.
Plan for rapid communication	Make sure every election worker knows who to contact first (and their mobile phone number), along with a list of any other contact methods (including emergency radios). • Tell poll workers to report immediately, even if they don't have all the information, so you are aware of the situation. Ask for frequent updates. • Ask for a clear report: how many people are involved, what identification they are wearing, and details of the situation.
Set up the polling place to help enforce the rules	Be sure that information about who is allowed in the voting area is posted at all entrances to the polling location. • Have signs with information about who can be in the polling place. • Identify the safety zone around the polling place with cones, chalk, painters' tape, or signs. • If possible, post signs to reserve parking near the entrance for voters. • Know if the building houses other services that federal agents might attempt to access.

Training election workers

Remind poll workers that their job on election day is to run an outstanding election.

However, if federal agents enter the safety perimeter or the polling place, they should be prepared. The lead worker should be the only person to speak to the ICE agents,

- Stay calm and keep voting going.
- Know how to recognize observers permitted under state law or approved federal monitors, and federal military or ICE agents who are not.
- Be prepared to ask for information about their purpose without obstructing them or sounding aggressive or frightened. Don't escalate the danger with confrontations.
- Gather clear information to report to the election office or other proper authority
- Know how to get a supervisor on the phone with the agents to make decisions.
- Know when to call law enforcement directly.
- Collect and document the facts.

If the situation escalates and safety is at risk

As in any emergency situation, remind them that the first priority is keeping voters and election workers safe. **If the situation is dangerous, have workers call 911.**

Then tell them to:

- **Follow the training for any other evacuation.** The priority is safety for voters, election workers, and anyone else in the area. They should know:
 - Where the safe gathering place is and other actions in an evacuation plan.
 - The plan for handling the chain of custody for election materials such as ballots, poll books, and voting equipment.
 - If the safety threat is worse outside the polling place, consider "sheltering in place" and closing access from the outside until law enforcement arrives.
- **Update the election office** with a concise report
 - "This is [name] from [location]. The situation has escalated."
 - [Describe what has happened]
 - "Is law enforcement on the way? When will they arrive? Should we call them again?"

We have training slides for this material that you can adapt to add to your own deck.

Role-play the response plan during training

One of the best ways to prepare workers for a bad situation is to role-play both the first actions they need to take, and a few scenarios. Include both easy situations and ones in which the best thing they can do is call 911 and keep themselves and the voters safe.

Roles for election workers	What they will do
Lead worker + 1 other	The lead worker approaches the federal agents. Their goal is to talk to the federal agents and learn what they can about who they are and their purpose in the voting location • The lead worker speaks to the agents • The other stays on the phone with the or “supervisor” to give updates as the situation unfolds. This person can also take notes.
1-2 workers	They go to the entrance to monitor the situation outside the actual polling place and maintain the voting safety perimeter. When a supervisor or law enforcement arrives and can bring them up to date on the situation. They will also be able to see if additional federal military or ICE agents arrive. If they do, they can use the same scripts below to try to hold them outside the perimeter.
Deputy or assistant + Other workers	Keep voting open • Manage the flow of traffic in the voting location • Support and direct voters • Protect voting materials As voters are ready to leave, ask them if they are willing to leave their contact information
Members of the election staff	During training, play the role of the federal agents.

Scenarios to use in training

Many of these scenarios are, in part, a way to remind workers that their – and everyone's safety – is the first consideration. The best solution may be to step back and call 911 rather than try to get in the middle of things.

Scenarios	Description
Agents enter quietly	A group of 3 uniformed ICE agents enters the polling place and approaches one of the check-in tables.
Agents refuse to answer questions	The lead worker has tried to ask the agents who they are and what their purpose is, but they refuse to answer.
Agents act aggressively	They step closer and say that they are here on government business and to step aside. One moves towards a voter, grabs them by the arm, and tells them to come with them
Agents outside the building	Two cars speed up to the parking lot outside the building. Four uniformed agents get out and start walking around a small group of voters entering or leaving the polling place.
Volume escalates into shouting	While a worker tries to get information from the agents, they start shouting that they are here on federal business and that everyone should back off.
Physical altercation breaks out	People outside the polling place have been yelling at each other, some objecting to the agents, others saying they will make elections safer. The volume had increased, and the crowd had grown when someone broke away from one group to aggressively threaten the other. Someone throws a punch.
People try to protect a voter	(Inside or outside). A group of people tries to surround a voter to shield them from the agents' attention.
Law enforcement arrives	The police arrive and take the agents aside to talk, but they are still inside the polling place.

Scripts for election workers

This is a script with sample texts for workers to use if ICE/Federal agents enter a voting location. Use them in training to practice speaking calmly, clearly, and loud enough to be heard without being confrontational. Include a copy in the kit for each location.

Use this when	What to do and say
Reporting to the office <i>If told to call local law enforcement, be prepared to give them the same information.</i>	Be ready to provide clear details about what is happening. Tell them who you are, your location, and why you are calling: “I’m [name] calling from [location].” “We have a situation developing with [armed federal agents] here.” Communicate what you know about who the agents are and what has happened “There are [number] of agents.” “They are wearing [any visible identification on their vests, vehicles, badges].” “They [are/do not appear to be] carrying weapons.” Describe the situation in 5-10 words, including who is talking to the agents, if anyone. For example: “They have approached a voter” or “They are standing in the entrance.” “[Name], the [lead poll worker] is talking to them now.” Ask what the next steps are. “I’m walking over to [the person talking to the agents] so I can relay information between you.” “Is there anything else I should do right now?”

Use this when	What to do and say
Approaching the agents <i>While interacting with a federal agent, don't raise your voice, touch or block them, or argue about the law. If you don't get an answer, just repeat the question or statement calmly and without sounding impatient or frustrated.</i>	Identify who they are "Hi, can I get your name and what agency you are from, please?" "Can I also get your badge number, please" Learn their purpose "Thanks. What's the purpose of your presence here today?" Ask for their authority or paperwork "Are you here under a judicial warrant, court order, or official assignment?" Either way, follow up with. "Let me go ahead and get my supervisor on the phone with you." OR "Can I put you on the phone with [my supervisor], please?" Inform them of the election procedures and ask them to step outside the safety zone and out of voters' view. "My instructions are that only voters or accredited observers are allowed inside the polling place. Can you give me a minute to get my supervisor on the phone?" "Would you please step outside with me, so that we don't disturb the people who are here to vote?" Use similar language if you have to repeat yourself. For example, you might try again to move the federal agents out of the way of voting. "We would like to continue letting people vote. Would it be possible for you to stand outside while you work this out with my supervisor?" "Please allow me to call our election supervisor so they can speak with you." OR "I have [my supervisor] on the phone. They would like to speak with you."

Use this when	What to do and say
Focus on keeping the situation calm <i>If you are told to try again to ask the federal agents to leave the polling place, continue speaking clearly and politely.</i>	Follow election office emergency procedures. "My instructions are that you are not allowed inside the polling place." "Please [come with me to somewhere outside the polling place] while we continue this discussion, so voting can continue." "Please step outside of the polling place while we wait for [my supervisor law enforcement]." If appropriate "[Someone] from the elections office is on the way. They should be here soon" OR "[The police department] is on the way."
Interacting with voters <i>Your main goal is to keep voters safe and keep voting going until a supervisor or law enforcement arrives.</i>	Re-arranging the traffic flow within the voting area "Could you move this line over here so we can keep everything orderly?" Moving the line of people waiting to vote to just outside the voting area "We're moving the line to [here]. Stay in the same order, and we'll direct you to the check-in table when the next worker is ready for you." As people leave or after the incident is over, try to get names and contact information for anyone who was present. "Thank you for voting. Would you be willing to leave your name and a contact phone number or email? You were in the polling place and witnessed this incident. We might want to contact you later when we write up our report."

Keeping good records of the incident

As with any emergency, it's important to have a complete record of the incident. Taking notes can be challenging during a stressful event, but it's helpful to review the types of information the poll worker team can collect.

One way to help your poll workers be ready is to suggest they keep a small notebook or piece of paper in their pocket so they are ready to help take notes. The stress of the moment can make it hard to remember details, so even a few simple words can help them provide an accurate report afterward.

Tall man. Maybe in his 30's. Showed an FBI badge. Name - Steve.

Then, when it is over, the team can put together a report, or someone from the office can talk to them to fill out a report.

When making or listening to a verbal report, the mnemonic SALUTE is a helpful reminder of the kind of information needed. It stands for:

S - Size . Note the number of agents and other people present, including the poll worker team, voters, or others in or around the voting location.

A - Activity. Describe what agents said and what they did, such as questioning people or making an arrest.

L - Location. Where, exactly, did they go in the polling place or area around it.

U - Uniforms. Describe any vests, patches, or agency labels on their clothing. Remember that poll workers may not be able to identify immigration enforcement officers by appearance alone.

T - Time. Record the time when the incident started, as well as the time of any key activities.

E - Equipment. List any vehicles, dogs, weapons, or other gear they have with them

In addition, any final report should include

- The names and contacts for any witnesses to the incident.
- If voting was interrupted, the time when voting was stopped and when it started again.
- Any other impacts on voting.

Incident report form

Date and time of incident: ____ / ____ / 2026 from ____ : ____ am/pm until ____ : ____ am/pm

Location (voting location name or address): _____

Who completed this report?

Name: _____ Phone number: _____

Who was involved?

Number of agents: _____

Describe any vests, patches, badge numbers, or agency labels on their clothing. List any vehicles, dogs, weapons, or other gear they have with them:

How many other people were at the polling place?

Poll workers: _____ Voters: _____ Others in or near the polling place: _____

What happened?

Did they have a ☐ judicial warrant ☐ administrative warrant, ☐ court order,
☐ official assignment or ☐ other paperwork _____

Describe what agents said and what they did, such as questioning people or making an arrest. Include details about where they went in the polling place and if they interacted with any election equipment.

Was voting interrupted? If so, describe what happened

Time voting stopped: ____ : ____ am/pm Time voting resumed ____ : ____ am/pm

What to do next?

As soon as the incident is over, call [number]. Complete this form and [where should it go?]

Who else observed the incident? List other key witnesses. *Please write clearly*

Name	Phone number	Role (voter, worker, other)

Is there anything else to report?

Providing an incident kit

Equip your poll workers with everything they need to respond quickly and confidently by creating a dedicated folder at each voting site containing key materials. Include the kit in training, so they practice finding and using the materials in the folder.

Here is a starter collection of materials to go into the folder. Edit them to reflect your office's procedures.

- **Cover page and key contacts** (*page 14*)
- **Scripts for election workers** (*pages 7-9*)
- **De-escalation pocket guide** (*From The Elections Group*
<http://electionsgroup.com/resource/de-escalation/>)
- **Incident report form** (*pages 11-12*)

Design tip

Make the folder for the kit easy to find and use

- Give the folder a title.
- Put key contacts on the cover
- 1 topic per page
- Give each item a prominent title at the top of the page so that a poll worker can easily flip through and find what they need

Incident Kit cover

Print this page or use the 3-1/3" x 4" label templates below

ICE quick reference

If ICE arrives at your site, call [number]



[name of office]

Key contacts

Poll worker hotline ###-###-####

Elections office ###-###-####

[Law enforcement] ###-###-####

Your [Rover] name _____

Phone number _____

More emergency response resources

Midterm Election 2026: Operational and Legal Considerations for Election Officials and Their Attorneys Regarding the Deployment of ICE, CBP, National Guard, and Federal Troops to Election Sites

Public Rights Project

[WhenSomethingHappens.org](#)

Center for Civic Design

[Scripts for poll workers](#)

Center for Civic Design/When Something Happens

[State Election Law Interference Handbooks](#)

The Brennan Center

[First Things First: Poll Worker Safety](#)

Election Security Exchange

[Communicating during an election incident](#)

Election Security Exchange

[Four Steps to Working with Challenging Visitors](#)

Committee for Safe and Secure Elections

[De-escalation posters and pocket guides](#)

The Elections Group

Center for Civic Design

We strive to make every interaction with the government easy, effective, and pleasant. We work with elections offices, democracy advocates, and civic engagement organizations to make elections easier to run, support innovation, and invite participation in elections. From our practical experience and applied research, we share best practices for civic design and our core skills of plain language, accessibility, information design, and civic research.

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[Civic Designing](#) newsletter

Public Rights Project

Public Rights Project helps local governments protect civil rights. We represent cities and counties in court, train government lawyers, and activate a national network of local leaders to respond to emerging threats. Our [Election Protection Hub](#) equips local election officials with the legal tools and knowledge to defend our fundamental right to vote. If you have concerns about federal agents at the polls or efforts to undermine your authority.

Contact our legal team directly at



elections@publicrightsproject.org

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