

THE
CARTER CENTER



TAKING CARE OF YOURSELF TO SERVE OTHERS:

A Well-being Resource Guide for Election Officials

This short guide is intended to provide resources to election officials to help support their own well-being and the well-being of their colleagues and teams. In it, you will find information on:

- The Signs and Impacts of Trauma
- Techniques for Promoting Resiliency and Recovery
- Mental Health Support Near You
- Online Security Tips and Toolkits

2020 was a record election year in the United States. Amid a global pandemic, Americans turned out to vote in record numbers. Many of them cast ballots in ways that were new to them as election officials around the country — election officials like you — adapted and responded to the new and challenging circumstances. All of this transpired in incredibly stressful circumstances, with election officials facing increased pressure and intense scrutiny. Political tensions and polarization were extremely high and this, coupled with mis- and disinformation about the election, created a hostile environment for many election officials and workers. In some cases, this hostility grew into harassment, intimidation, and threatening behavior. You may have feared for your own well-being or that of your colleagues or loved ones. If so, you are not alone. Many election officials in states and counties across the country — from all backgrounds, and across the political spectrum — felt the same.

A [study by the Brennan Center for Justice](#) found that one in three election officials feel unsafe because of their job. Nearly one in five listed threats to their lives as a job-related concern, 78 percent said social media has made their job more difficult, and 54 percent said social media has made their job more dangerous. Many of you have received harassing phone calls and text messages and have had to hire personal security, relocate, and find other means of protecting yourselves and your families.

Unfortunately, even though the 2020 election is behind us, threatening behavior persists. You or someone you know may be experiencing the effects of these experiences. These may occur at times that are surprising to you, and in ways that catch you off guard. People respond differently to psychological injury, and it is not uncommon to have lasting emotional damage (like sadness, anxiety, worry, or reoccurring thoughts) and physical responses (like sleeplessness, pain, or headaches). Election officials often pride themselves on being practical and resilient public servants. In the 2022 and 2024 election cycles, these characteristics will be needed more than ever. But it may be necessary to take a few extra steps to ensure your own well-being so that you can continue to serve your voters and protect yourself.

The Signs and Impacts of Trauma, and Techniques for Promoting Resiliency and Recovery

Trauma is an emotional reaction to an overwhelming situation, event, or ongoing experience that threatens one's sense of security. If you have had a traumatic experience, it is normal to feel a variety of sensations, such as distress, guilt, shame, or fear. The trauma response is an intelligent function of evolution that serves to protect the survival of our species. However, when trauma is not addressed, its effects can lead to outcomes that negatively impact an individual. Response to trauma is unique and varies from person to person. In some cases, it leads to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Signs of trauma may include:

- Fight, flight, or freeze responses
- Unpredictable emotions
- Flashbacks
- Strained relationships
- Racing thoughts
- Physical pain (especially stomach pain and headaches)
- Decreased appetite
- Increase substance use/dependence

Mental Health America provides research on resiliency and recovery from trauma and supports several strategies that may serve to protect an individual from long-term distress, including:

- **Social support:** Being able to share your feelings and experiences with people you can trust will likely help you feel less alone.
- **Relaxation techniques:** Muscle relaxation, breathing exercises, and meditation can help increase your ability to cope in stressful situations.
 - Practicing progressive muscle relaxation can be an essential tool to relieve stress, and it may help to use an audio recording until you learn all the muscle groups and get better at focusing on specific groups.
- **Grounding strategies:** When experiencing flashbacks or distressing thoughts, grounding techniques help you to reorient your mind toward the present moment.
 - One common grounding technique is called the 5-4-3-2-1 method — use your senses to notice five things you see, four things you hear, three things you can touch or feel, two things you can smell, and one thing you can taste.
 - Other examples of grounding might include putting your hands in water and focusing on how the temperature and texture feels or going for a walk and focusing only on your steps.
- **Avoiding negative coping mechanisms:** Negative coping mechanisms can include “quick fixes” such as substance use, excessive sleeping, and isolation.
 - To promote positive coping, consider engaging in emotion-based coping or problem-based coping, either of which will provide anxiety and stress relief if done diligently and effectively. Problem-based habits can include creating a to-do list, working on managing time, establishing healthy boundaries, and asking for support. Emotion-based strategies include meditating, giving yourself a pep talk, taking a bath, or exercising.
- **Consider therapeutic interventions:** Processing the experience with a professional, even if just for the short-term, can help you develop healthy behaviors and support you in overcoming traumatic stress. Tips for finding therapeutic support are included below.

Find Mental Health Support Near You

If you are experiencing signs of trauma or believe it would benefit you to process an experience with a professional, there are resources available near you.

Mental Health America – Take a Confidential Mental Health Self-Assessment
Mental Health America provides screening tools to determine whether you may be experiencing symptoms of a mental health condition. These conditions, such as depression or anxiety, are real, common, and treatable.

Selected screening questions include:

In the past month have you...

- Been constantly on guard, watchful, or easily startled?
- Felt numb or detached from people, activities, or your surroundings?
- Had nightmares about the event(s) or thought about the event(s) when you did not want to?

Mental Health America – [Warmline](#) (free, confidential phone line)

Mental Health America's warmlines are for anybody who just needs to talk to a mental health professional about their own mental health. They are different from the suicide prevention lifeline, which is designed to keep you safe in the moment and give you ample support, as well as connection to crisis resources. Warmlines are for having a conversation about your mental health with an individual who has had their own mental health problems and can empathize with mental struggles. Their goals are to help you evaluate your situation and put you in touch with a nearby professional who can help you.

Mental Health America – [Find a Support Group](#)

Support groups are spaces that can alleviate isolation and loneliness and connect you with other individuals who may be going through similar struggles. These are often organized with a specific topic in mind, such as grief, illness, family, divorce, etc., and can also be accessed online through a variety of options such as discussion boards, online communities, and blogs.

National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) – [Find a Support Group](#)

The two main kinds of support groups that NAMI offers are groups called NAMI Connection and NAMI Family Support. NAMI Connection helps bring together people who are experiencing mental health conditions so that they can learn from and support each other. NAMI Family Support provides a similar opportunity for family members, friends, and significant others of those with mental health condition.

Your State's Behavioral Health Office

Each state has some form of a Department for Behavioral Health that provides community mental health services. Reach out to yours to see if you can set up a plan to provide needed services to your staff and set up mental health debriefs for your team after Election Day.

Physical Security Tips and Toolkits for Election Officials

ELECTION OFFICIAL SECURITY

The Election Assistance Commission has up-to-date guidance for election officials on how to improve personal security and document threats to help strengthen law enforcement response.

RUNNING ELECTIONS WITHOUT FEAR: ENSURING PHYSICAL SAFETY FOR ELECTION PERSONNEL

This report, produced by The Elections Group, addresses the potential for online threats to escalate to real-world incidents. It tells you what you can do now to prepare for such incidents and outlines de-escalation techniques should someone confront you. The report offers ways to build relationships with law enforcement to help them understand the urgency and uniqueness of the election security situation.

COMMITTEE FOR SAFE AND SECURE ELECTIONS

This cross-partisan committee has compiled resources for election administrators and law enforcement aimed at protecting election workers and voters from violence, threats, and intimidations. Resources can be found at safeelections.org.

ADDRESS CONFIDENTIALITY PROGRAM (ACP)

Each state has its own ACP that allows for the withholding of personal information in public records if it is specifically designated as confidential. This service is often used by victims of domestic violence or stalking, but in many states, anyone with a safety need can take advantage of the program. Reach out to your state's ACP to learn about the eligibility requirements and whether election officials can apply.

ONLINE SECURITY TIPS AND TOOLKITS

Because the internet and online anonymity creates an environment that is particularly conducive to harassment, the following resources may also be helpful as you think about how to build the resilience of your team.

PROTECTING ELECTION OFFICIALS FROM DIGITAL THREATS

This report, prepared by Security Positive and The Elections Group, presents a safety planning framework that outlines the type of digital threats election officials receive and recommends concrete steps to strengthen their resilience against online harassment that turns physical. The full framework, as well as steps to take to shore up security, is available as an interactive website via Bright Lines, a project of Security Positive. Bright Lines also provides guidance for securing devices and work-from-home setups, and strategies for incident response planning, managing trolls, and working with law enforcement.

CRASH OVERRIDE

Crash Override is a network of experts and survivors who work directly with victims, tech companies, lawmakers, media, security experts, and law enforcement to educate and provide assistance. It offers such resources as a crisis helpline, advocacy group, and resource center for individuals experiencing online abuse, where you can find the helpful Crash Override's Automated Cybersecurity Helper (C.O.A.C.H.) and multiple other guides.

DIGITAL FIRST AID KIT

The Digital First Aid Kit is a free resource to help rapid responders, digital security trainers, and tech-savvy activists better protect themselves and the communities they support against the most common types of digital emergencies. It can also be used by human rights defenders, bloggers, journalists, or media activists who want to learn more about how they can protect themselves and support others. This is best to use when in an emergency when you need help on an issue fast.

BLOCK BOT

The Block Together feature of Block Bot allows a group of individuals to simultaneously block aggressors on Twitter. This is ideal for an election office to use together if multiple individuals are likely to be attacked by the same aggressor.

DOX YOURSELF

One method of protection is to “dox yourself,” referring to the action of seeing what information exists on you online and what someone who is trying to dox you might find so that you can better protect yourself. [This article](#) also provides tools and resources.

Additional Resources

National Alliance on Mental Illness - [Video Resource Library](#)

The NAMI video resource library is an exceptional source of mental health knowledge and discussion.

ONLINE HARASSMENT FIELD MANUAL

From PEN America, this field manual offers concrete strategies on how to defend yourself and others.

ZEN

A complete tech manual on privacy and online security.

Please note that while many of these resources are not aimed specifically at election officials and may have a target audience of activists or others, we include them here because you may still find helpful tools and resources within them.