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# Reporting and Responding to Political Violence

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# THE RISE OF POLITICAL VIOLENCE IN AMERICA

In May 2022, the Mayors Innovation Project launched #MayorSafety month with the [release of a survey](#) of US mayors revealing an alarming increase in political violence directed at mayors – in particular, at women mayors and mayors of color. In May 2023, we issued this round-up of new resources and best practices, along with opportunities to share your experiences.



# The Current Landscape

Women leaders, leaders of color, and LGBTQ+ leaders continue to face more serious and prevalent threats to their safety than their white, cisgender, heterosexual male counterparts. These threats are not just to their personal safety, but to democracy, threatening to deter individuals from campaigning, serving in office, and seeking subsequent terms – and thus threatening to deter progress in increasing representation across race, gender, and sexual orientation in elected office.

From 2022-2023, new efforts have been made to increase data on threats to local officials. A new [database](#) from Princeton University's [Bridging Divides Initiative](#) is tracking these threats and the stories behind them. The [National League of Cities](#) also established a [self-reporting tool](#) to help capture the experiences of elected officials. These efforts will help build more comprehensive data about the prevalence, degree, and impact of harassment and threats to public officials. We encourage mayors and other city leaders in our network to use these channels to report threats and harassment and to reach out with questions about reporting.

The number of self-described “First Amendment auditors” is also on the rise, including individuals who confront municipal staff, try to access different parts of public buildings, or record and post or live stream videos of themselves walking city hall. These incidents range from [unsettling municipal staff](#) by following and filming them to deeply disturbing [personal threats](#) against officials and their families. These events have left elected officials, city staff, and members of the public looking to do business with the city anxious and fearful.

While members of the public generally have a First Amendment right to these actions, they do not have the right to threaten or incite violence. For more specific guidance on legal considerations for First Amendment audits and actions cities can take, see [Responding to First Amendment “Audits” in the Local Government Context](#) from the University of North Carolina's [School of Government](#).



## Resources for Online Safety

From trolling to doxing, elected leaders are facing new forms of online abuse and harassment. While mayors and other public figures are [limited](#) in their ability to block sources of harassment via email and social media, they can take steps to protect themselves.

In partnership with the [Digital Defense Fund](#), we developed a [security checklist](#) for public officials that includes simple actions you can take right now to increase your security. Additionally, we recommend the

[Digital Resilience Toolkit](#) from #ShePersisted. While written for women in politics, the toolkit's recommendations apply to any elected official. In addition to digital defense strategies, the toolkit includes resources and support for effectively reporting and responding to online threats.

With online threats, it can be difficult to know how to respond and whether something rises to the level of official reporting. [PEN America](#) has a questionnaire to help public officials decide whether to report online threats and the [Digital Resilience Toolkit](#) has recommendations with effective public responses (including examples).

# How Mayors Can Equitably Support Mayoral Safety and Defend Democracy

City halls and other municipal buildings have increasingly become targets for threats, harassment, and violence. Local leaders advocating for increased security in physical municipal spaces often face intense scrutiny and accusations of being anti-democratic; this scrutiny is often higher for mayors of color and women mayors. There are ways to maintain the democratic process while supporting common sense safety measures to protect elected officials and the public who attend meetings and visit public spaces to engage with them.

## **LISTEN TO AND DEFEND YOUR COLLEAGUES WHEN THEY TALK ABOUT THREATS.**

While you may not be the subject of current threats, such threats are a detriment to democracy at large. In [California](#), a number of elected officials stood together in solidarity against the increased dangers posed by threats of violence and harassment against women of color.

In response to an increase in personal attacks against elected officials in Maplewood, MO, Mayor Nikylan Knapper's administration [advanced and passed a city resolution](#) creating harsher penalties for hate crimes. Taking action like this that expands upon existing state law sends a message that such actions will not be tolerated by local law enforcement.

## **PUBLICLY MAKE THE CASE FOR SECURITY AND REPORT THREATS THAT HAPPEN.**

In the recent mayoral election in [Green Bay, WI](#), both mayoral candidates posted publicly about threats they received during the campaign. Mayor Eric Genrich reported the threats he received to police, while opponent Chad Weininger did not. In [Bogalusa, LA](#) Mayor Tyrin Truong was faced with racist threats online. In response, he spoke out at a press conference and got police involved.

## **EXAMINE AND ASSESS YOUR CITY'S INTERNAL POLICIES AND SPACES/REGULATIONS.**

[Cleveland, OH](#) implemented new security measures after City employees engaged in threatening behavior, and [Rochester, NY](#) updated their security policies matching those of nearby cities in response to increased threats at public buildings across the country.

If threatening behavior persists and makes the situation unsafe or unproductive, a local government may pursue changes to the physical environment. For example, in most cases members of the public can be barred from accessing private spaces such as “employees only” areas and secured access areas. A city can also [adopt a policy or ordinance governing filming on government property](#) or particular areas of it.

## **KNOW YOUR RIGHTS AND BOUNDARIES.**

As noted above, members of the public have the First Amendment right to be present, follow, and photograph or record public employees and elected officials at work. Charges cannot be pursued in most cases unless the actions make it impossible for agencies to conduct their business. However, the local government also has an obligation to protect its employees from harassment.

De-escalation training and training from local law enforcement for employees and elected officials can help manage these interactions with the public, helping them know their rights and when to report behavior. The [Bridging Divides Initiative](#) published [Guidelines for De-Escalation and Communication Around Contentious Meetings for Local Elected Officials](#) along with links to [resources for de-escalation training](#) in each state.

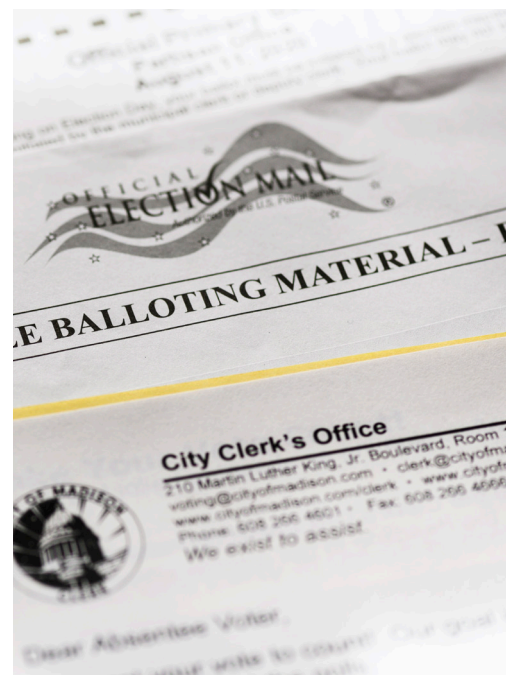
# Making the Case

Elected officials often face scrutiny and criticism when advocating for increased safety measures in local government buildings and public spaces. Effective tips to help you make the case for common sense security measures include:

- Talk about the benefit to everyone. Officials in [Hopewell, VA](#) spoke passionately about how increased security measures benefit not just municipal workers and elected officials but also members of the public seeking to voice their opinions and do business in the City.
- Consider the messenger. As the mayor's office may be more heavily scrutinized when advocating for changes directly, some cities have seen success having the police department or an outside entity assess the space in question to make a professional recommendation. The [Lawton, OK](#) Police Department conducted a threat assessment of City Hall that involved evaluating the security of the building and making recommendations for how they could improve safety.
- Lead with transparency. Public response often speculates on the cost and funding source for changes like these. Be clear about where the money is coming from and how much it will cost. In planning for changes to security in [Winston Salem, NC](#), the City clearly articulated what changes were expected, how much they would cost, and where the money was coming from.

Local elected leaders are increasingly facing incidents of political violence, often followed by public scrutiny when they take action to address it. New data collection efforts aim to demonstrate the need for common sense changes that protect officials and anyone who seeks to engage in the democratic process. Political violence – and the disproportionate way it impacts women mayors and mayors of color – is a threat to the democratic process.

If you would like to share the challenges you are seeing in your community around political violence, or to connect with additional resources and solutions, [contact us](#) to get started.



This brief is part of a series of publications MIP has released that was originally researched and compiled as a technical assistance memo to a participating member city. This memo was written in 2023 in response to a specific research question submitted by that member city. To make this publicly available, we've removed references to the original request and any location-specific recommendations. MIP members are invited to please reach out to us at [knspear@mayorsinnovation.org](mailto:knspear@mayorsinnovation.org) to request their own policy memo on this or other topics.

## About Mayors Innovation Project

The Mayors Innovation Project is a learning network among American mayors committed to “high road” policy and governance: shared prosperity, environmental sustainability, and efficient democratic government. We are a project of High Road Strategy Center.



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