

THE
CARTER CENTER



TAKING CARE OF YOURSELF AND YOUR TEAM

A Well-being Resource Guide for Election Officials
Second Edition

This short guide is intended to provide resources to election officials to support their mental and physical well-being and that of their colleagues and staff. In this resource guide you will find information on:

- Recognizing the Signs of Stress, Burnout, and Trauma
- Making Room for Wellness: Resources and Toolkits
- Mental Health Resources and Support
- Security Tips and Toolkits for Election Officials

Election offices across the country have experienced high rates of [turnover](#) in the aftermath of the 2020 presidential election. Many veteran officials have left the profession, primarily because of heightened stress and burnout, as well as traumatic experiences from harassment, intimidation, and threats. This turnover creates opportunities to recruit younger professionals; however, the new risks associated with being an election official have significantly limited the ability of some election offices to fill vacancies.

As important as it is to replace election officials who have left the field, it is equally important to retain seasoned professionals who have experience administering elections. Hostile behavior, threats, and harassment incur high costs, increase stress levels, burnout, and trauma, and disproportionately affect [women and people of color](#). Many fear for their physical safety and the safety of their family members. Election officials often feel isolated and withdrawn and may lose the close connections they once had with their constituents because of rising public skepticism about the officials' ability to run free, fair, and secure elections.

To support the public servants who work at the front lines of elections, pro-democracy stakeholders have combined efforts to raise awareness around the [challenges](#) election officials face with respect to their wellness and safety. This effort includes investing in research to better understand why these challenges exist and persist and to identify interventions that will better support the election worker community.

The resiliency of the U.S. election system depends on election officials' ability to conduct their work in a safe environment and with the resources they need to perform their constitutional duties.

As a community, election officials take pride in their ability to overcome challenges and be resilient. However, this resilience often comes at a personal cost. Now that the 2024 election is here, election officials should fortify their resilience by taking a few extra steps to ensure their mental and psychological well-being as they support the democratic process.

Election officials are encouraged to consider and apply these suggested strategies and methods to reduce daily stress for themselves and their teams.

Many of the resources included in this guide start with the notion of self-care. That said, framing wellness in terms of self-care can sometimes feel selfish and [isolating](#), as if one is left on one's own when it comes to wellness. A more helpful way to think about wellness is that it involves several individuals, all of whom make up a community. In other words, we should promote taking care of ourselves as well as taking care of others. By taking care of ourselves, we can navigate challenging situations and in turn take care of others.

Recognizing the Signs of Stress, Burnout, and Trauma

Stress is a state of worry or mental tension and is a natural response when experiencing challenges or threats to which we are called to respond. Stress can significantly impact one's well-being.

Burnout is a condition directly associated with one's occupational environment; it involves emotional exhaustion, physical fatigue, and cognitive weariness.

Trauma describes an emotional reaction to an overwhelming situation, event, or ongoing experience that threatens one's sense of security. The most common signs of trauma are 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, the trauma response will lead to [post-traumatic stress disorder \(PTSD\)](#).

Signs of stress, burnout and/or trauma may include¹:

Stress

- Headaches
- Difficulty breathing
- Panic attacks
- Racing thoughts
- Heartburn
- Appetite changes
- Rashes
- Anxiety
- Depression
- Difficulty concentrating
- Bursts of anger or crying spells
- Feeling guilty, hopeless, sad
- Avoiding social interactions

Burnout

- Emotional and physical exhaustion
- Anxiety
- Sleep deprivation
- Headaches
- Appetite changes
- Depression
- Irritability
- Frustration
- Decreased productivity
- Lower immunity

Trauma

- Anger
- Depression
- Sleep deprivation
- Problems with memory
- Racing thoughts
- Intrusive memories
- Fight, flight, or freeze response
- Unpredictable emotions
- Feeling timid or more pressure
- Substance abuse or dependence

¹ This list is not exhaustive and should not be used to diagnose stress, burnout, or trauma.

Making Room for Wellness: Resources and Toolkits

The Elections Group (electionsgroup.com) has produced a "[Wellness and Resilience in a Box](#)" toolkit to support election officials who experience stress, burnout, and trauma with practical and cost-efficient tips and activities that can be integrated into the workday. The toolkit includes eight useful one-page summaries of key strategies and practices for easy use by time-conscious election officials:

- [Building Resilience](#)
- [Checking In](#)
- [Gadgets](#)
- [Healthy Sleep](#)
- [Mindfulness](#)
- [Social Connection](#)
- [Stress Relief](#)
- [Stretching and Relaxation](#)

These resources aim to build resilience not only at the individual level, but also in the election office as a whole. Examples include:

- **Gratitude journaling:** Improves one's ability to handle stress, improves problem-solving skills, and improves one's overall well-being.
- **Body scan meditation:** Increases self-awareness and awareness of any mental health challenges in real time.
- **Stress-relief gadgets** (fidget spinners, coloring books, stress balls): Offer quick and effective stress relief, enhance focus and mental clarity.
- **Walking meditation:** Increases self-awareness, reduces stress and anxiety, improves focus and decision making.
- **Lunchtime social break:** Enhances teamwork and collaboration, reduces feelings of isolation and stress, improves job satisfaction.

Similarly, community-based nonprofit organizations such as Mental Health America (mhanational.org) support several strategies that may protect election officials from long-term distress, including:

- **Social support:** Sharing your feelings and experiences with people you trust can help you to 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 by improving cognitive function, energy levels, and alertness.

- 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 focus on reorienting your mind toward being in 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 feel or going for a walk and focusing only on your steps.

- **Avoiding negative coping mechanisms:** Negative coping mechanisms can include “quick fixes,” which may include 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 relief from anxiety and stress if done diligently and effectively.

- Problem-based coping habits can include creating a to-do list, working on managing time, establishing healthy boundaries, and asking for support.

- Emotion-based coping strategies include identifying and honoring your feelings, or doing something you enjoy like 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.

Mental Health Resources and Support

Election officials may reach a point where their state of mental health may prompt the need or desire for professional care and advice.

SCREENING TOOLS

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?

WARMLINES/HELPLINES

Mental Health America's [warmlines](#) are free, confidential phone lines, available to anyone who just needs to talk to a mental health professional about their mental health. They are different from the 988 [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. The warmline instead is for having a conversation about your mental health with someone who has also had mental health problems and can empathize with you. The goal is to help you evaluate your situation and put you in touch with a nearby professional who can help you.

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's

(samhsa.gov) [national helpline](#) (1-800-662-4357) is a free, confidential, 24/7/365 treatment referral and information service (in English and Spanish) for individuals and families facing mental or substance use disorders.

Crisis Text Line (text HOME to 741741) provides free, 24/7, high-quality [text-based mental health support](#) and crisis intervention by empowering a community of trained volunteers to support people in their moments of greatest need.

SUPPORT GROUPS

Mental Health America's [support groups](#) are offered as a space 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, and can be accessed online through a variety of means, such as discussion boards, online communities, and blogs.

The National Alliance on Mental Illness (nami.org) offers two main kinds of [support groups](#): NAMI Connection and NAMI Family Support Group. NAMI Connection brings together people who are experiencing mental health conditions to learn from and support each other. NAMI Family Support Group provides a similar opportunity for family members, friends, and significant others of those with mental health conditions.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The National Alliance on Mental Illness' [video resource library](#) is an exceptional source of mental health knowledge and discussion. The topics cover many areas of mental health, including depression, personality disorders, trauma, different kinds of therapy, and more. There are also resources on identity challenges regarding race, sexual orientation, and so forth.

PEN America's (pen.org) [self-care](#) resources, which are part of its [online harassment field manual](#), are designed to support writers, journalists, and activists who identify as women, BIPOC, or LGBTQIA+ as they navigate online abuse. These resources can be helpful for election officials who experience similar, if not identical, challenges.

Security Tips and Toolkits for Election Officials

PHYSICAL SAFETY AND SECURITY

The U.S. Election Assistance Commission (EAC.gov) has compiled a [physical safety and security resource guide](#) to support election officials and their staffs. Many public officials, including election officials during election season, are grappling with new or heightened physical safety and security risks that could affect themselves, their staff, and voters. Certainly, threats to physical safety contribute to stress and impair mental well-being, but to effectively conduct

an election, officials and staff must be physically present and safe in the workplace. The EAC's resources include guidance and tips for election officials on how to improve personal security and how to document threats to help strengthen law enforcement response.

Each state has its own **Address Confidentiality Program** (ACP) that allows personal information to be exempt from being shared through any public record if it is specifically designated as confidential. This resource is often used for victims of domestic violence or stalking, but in many states, the defined group is much broader, to include anyone with a safety need. Reach out to your state's ACP to learn about the eligibility requirements and learn if election officials can apply. There is a current push for states to expand their ACPs' eligibility requirements.

DIGITAL THREATS AND ONLINE HARASSMENT

Security Positive (securitypositive.com) and **The Elections Group** produced a [safety planning framework](#) that outlines the type of digital threats election officials receive and recommends concrete steps they can take in their individual capacities to strengthen resilience against online harassment that may turn physical. The full framework, as well as steps to take to shore up your security, is available as an interactive website via [Brightlines](https://www.brightlin.es) (www.brightlin.es), a project of Security Positive. Brightlines also provides guidance for securing your devices and your work-from-home setup, as well as strategies for planning incident response, managing trolls, and working with law enforcement.

Crash Override (crashoverridenetwork.com) is a network of experts and survivors who work directly with victims, tech companies, lawmakers, media, security experts, and law enforcement to provide education about digital threats and offer assistance. The [resource center](#) includes Crash Override's Automated Cybersecurity Helper (C.O.A.C.H.), a crisis helpline, an advocacy group, and other resources for individuals experiencing online abuse.

Protect Our Election (protectourelection.com) offers pro bono services to election officials to protect their privacy in digital spaces, including anti-doxing services. These include examining what information exists about you online and

identifying what someone who is trying to dox you might be able find so that you can better protect yourself.

The Games and Online Harassment Hotline (gameshotline.org) also provides [tips and guides](#) on preventing doxing, keeping your online domains secure, navigating social media securely, and more. While these guides are designed with women, people of color, and trans and genderqueer people in mind, they are applicable and helpful to anyone experiencing online violence.

PEN America's [Online Harassment Field Manual](#) offers concrete strategies for defending yourself and others from online harassment and abuse. The manual includes strategies on how to prepare for and respond to online abuse, how to practice self-care, how to request and provide support, and what legal issues to consider when interacting with law enforcement regarding online abuse.

A website called **Zen and the art of making tech work for you** (gendersec.tacticaltech.org/wiki/index.php/Complete_manual) offers a [tech manual](#) on privacy and online security. It is a community-built resource for a growing community of activists, human rights defenders, and technologists. The manual is designed to be a living, growing collection of practical guidance and information that uniquely speaks to the community's needs, experiences, and activism, both online and offline.

Lean on Yourself and Each Other

These resources aim to support election officials as they navigate unprecedented challenges that can interfere with election administration and significantly impact their mental health and physical and digital safety, as well as those of their staff and family members. Election officials are respected for their resilience when facing any challenge, but that resilience should not come at the expense of health, safety, and well-being. It is important to further invest in building support structures like those offered here so that election officials can feel comfortable and safe while carrying out their critical work.

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