

Information Breakdowns in Elections

PREVENTION AND RESPONSE GUIDE



Clear and timely communication is critical to running elections – especially during uncertainty or crisis. When communication breaks down, voters can become confused, operations can slow and trust can erode. These breakdowns may come from false information spreading, inaccurate media stories, or internal mistakes.

This guide explains how to spot risks, prevent communication failures, and respond quickly when issues occur.

Key Takeaways

- Communication breakdowns and incorrect information can come from a variety of sources so beware of the warning signs.
- Provide accurate information in real time and share the correct information quickly across all voter-facing channels.
- Maintain clear workflows to ensure accurate and cohesive internal communication is maintained.
- Correct information errors including errors in media reporting.
- Breakdowns may occur but there are ways to get back on track.

1. Communication Breakdowns and Warning Signs

Communication of unclear or false information has many sources, each capable of spreading confusion quickly if not addressed. Let's take a look at some of these sources.

- **External Information (online & community sources).** False or misleading information can spread quickly through social media, text messages, or word of mouth. This can include wrong polling hours, fake location changes, or made-up problems like machine failures or missing ballots.
- **AI-Generated Messages.** Some messages may look official but are created by artificial intelligence and are not real. These can trick voters into believing false information about voting rules or deadlines (e.g., incorrect claims about ID requirements, mail-ballot deadlines, or who is eligible to vote can mislead voters and discourage participation).
- **Media Misreporting.** News outlets may report incorrect details when information is still



developing. This can include wrong turnout numbers, misunderstood technical issues, or quotes taken out of context. Even when media outlets fix mistakes, the incorrect information may already have spread widely and caused confusion.

- **Internal Office Miscommunications.** Staff may share inconsistent or outdated instructions with poll workers or post incorrect information online, leading to public confusion.
- **Unauthorized Public Statements.** Employees speaking publicly without approval can share incomplete or inaccurate information, especially if there is no clear communication process in place.

All of these communication breakdowns can create voter confusion, reduce trust, and cause real challenges for election operations.

Election officials should stay alert to indicators that communication issues are emerging. For example:

- Repeated questions from voters may reveal gaps in public understanding.
- Confusion reported from poll workers, call centers, or community partners may signal a larger issue.
- Journalists may contact the office with incorrect assumptions, suggesting that the wrong information is circulating.
- Staff may unintentionally relay conflicting instructions, or seemingly official social media posts may appear that do not come from the election office.
- Rumors spreading in voting lines or at early-vote locations can also point to an unfolding problem.



When multiple signs appear, leaders from elections, communications, IT, legal, and security should come together quickly to assess the situation and coordinate a response.¹

1 CISA & U.S. Election Assistance Commission – Election Infrastructure Incident Response Communications Guide <https://www.cisa.gov/resources-tools/resources/election-infrastructure-incident-response-communications-guide>

2. How to Prevent Internal Miscommunications

Information can often break down within an organization. When this happens, getting the correct information out is all the more challenging. As we consider how to communicate with the public, spend some time focusing on these practices designed to prevent internal miscommunications.²

- **Keep one reliable source of information.** Internal alignment is strongest when all official updates are stored in a single shared location that limits editing access to essential staff. Requiring employees to confirm review of updated guidance ensures consistent understanding of procedures and public messaging.
- **Limit who can speak for the office.** Only designated spokespeople should issue public comments or speak with the media. Staff should be reminded not to post or comment publicly - especially online - without explicit authorization. Clear boundaries help avoid conflicting statements that may confuse voters or undermine trust.
- **Share timely updates with employees and poll workers.** Those facing the concerns from the public directly need access to accurate information. Text alerts and quick-reference cards with pre-defined holding statements are useful tools to respond rapidly to circulating rumors and helps ensure consistent messaging is provided to all.

Identify what the message is and ensure that there is one official message through all communications channels so everyone is saying the same thing.

3. Provide Accurate Information in Real Time

Effective real-time communication must be clear and timely. Consider these key practices to provide accurate information, and when necessary, counter any incorrect information being circulated.

- **Follow the Monitor → Verify → Communicate Process**
 - » Monitor social media, field reports from poll workers, and phone call activity to detect emerging concerns.
 - » Once an issue is spotted, promptly verify the source of the information.
 - » After confirming the facts, communicate concise corrections across all channels. This approach ensures accuracy while preventing the spread of conflicting or premature information.

² EAC – Communications Clearinghouse Resources <https://www.eac.gov/election-officials/clearinghouse-resources-communications>



- **Correct information quickly and clearly**
 - » Corrections should be direct and simple - for example, “Polling hours are 7 a.m.–8 p.m. Claims saying otherwise are incorrect.”
 - » Officials should provide immediate next steps, such as directing voters to the hotline or official website.
 - » Updates should be repeated regularly, since many voters will not see the first message.
- **Make it clear where voters should go for accurate information**
 - » All public updates should originate from the same official channels, such as the election website, social media accounts, press releases, and voter hotlines.
 - » Keep website banners up-to-date.³

4. How to Handle Incorrect Media Reports

Sometimes the information reported by the media is not correct or is misleading. Here are some helpful suggestions for responding to media misreporting.

- **Respond Right Away.** When media reports contain inaccuracies, the election office should respond immediately. Staff should contact the reporter or editor using established media lists, request corrections when necessary, and issue their own clarification rather than waiting for the outlet to act. Prompt engagement reduces the spread of false information and sets the record straight.⁴
- **Use short, pre-approved statements.** Pre-approved messaging helps the office respond swiftly and consistently. These statements should be brief and adaptable to various situations - for example, clarifying that a reported issue does not affect ballot counting or confirming that voting locations remain open. Having these messages ready reduces delays during fast-moving events.
- **Track All Media Questions.** Maintaining a simple media log helps the office understand what information reporters are seeking, what was provided, and whether follow-up actions are needed. This record supports transparency, consistency, and improved coordination across the communications team.

3 Helpful resources available: CISA & EAC – Enhancing Election Security Through Public Communications https://www.cisa.gov/sites/default/files/2024-06/Enhancing%20Election%20Security%20Through%20Public%20Communications_508c.pdf and The Elections Group – Crisis Communications Toolkit <https://electionsgroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Telling-Our-Story.pdf>

4 Partnership for Large Election Jurisdictions - Issue Guide for Communicating Through Unexpected Challenges: <https://takeetheplej.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Issue-Guide-Unexpected-Issues.pdf>



5. How to Respond and Recover After a Communications Breakdown

The unexpected happens. Election officials have a lot going on, usually all at the same time. It is fair to predict that bad things, like communications snafus, will occur.⁵ So, if and when it happens, do the following:

- **Take immediate steps to correct the information.** When incorrect information spreads, the election office should issue a correction quickly. Updates to the website, press list, and social media accounts should occur simultaneously to ensure consistent messaging. Poll-worker supervisors should receive rapid internal updates so they can clarify details for voters on-site.
- **Rebuild trust.** Following a breakdown, officials should communicate calmly and transparently about what occurred. Emphasizing continuity - such as confirming that all ballots cast will be securely counted - helps restore voter confidence.
- **Review what happened.** After the incident, the team should document the cause of the breakdown, why the information spread, and how quickly it was corrected. This evaluation should inform revisions to standard procedures, improvement of monitoring tools, and strengthening of early-warning indicators.

5 Harvard Belfer Center / DDDP – Election Cyber Incident Communications Coordination Guide https://www.belfercenter.org/sites/default/files/2024-08/CommunicationsGuide_0.pdf

