

Managing Election Site Evacuations



Floods, fires, gas leaks, building damage, and even bomb threats may require evacuations from an election facility. The decision can be difficult because an **evacuation creates challenges** to the chain of custody, the security of materials, and voter participation. If not managed well, these challenges **can diminish confidence in the election**.

The Committee for Safe and Secure Elections published a high-level set of illustrative recommendations in their [Mitigating Election Disruption from Bomb Threats and Hoaxes](#).

This document is a deeper dive addressing:

- The decision to evacuate
- Evacuating a voting site
- Evacuating a central office or facility
- Communicating with the public
- Practicing evacuations

The Decision to Evacuate

Situations threatening personal safety make the need to evacuate obvious. In some cases, other authorities including law enforcement, emergency management, or a school superintendent or other landlord may require you to evacuate a building.

It may be surprising to learn that **in many situations, the decision to evacuate is left to** the election official, at least initially, or even local workers if communications break down. Meet with the relevant agencies during your election planning phase to clarify these decision-making protocols before you're in the middle of an incident.

In a bomb threat,¹ law enforcement may defer to your knowledge to judge whether the threat is genuine. Or an election worker may call you first about a toaster fire. But is it still burning? Has anything else caught fire? Is there smoke, and how much?

1 For a detailed discussion of handling bomb threats, see [Mitigating Election Disruption from Bomb Threats and Hoaxes](#) (Committee for Safe and Secure Elections).



Quickly getting answers to a few critical questions helps guide your decision on whether and how to evacuate:

- Is the risk of injury or death genuine and immediate?
 - If **the risk is immediate**, evacuation must begin right away.
 - » Even when evacuation is urgent, **use a calm voice and tone to steady the nerves of those evacuating**. Panic can trigger bad decisions or tunnel vision that ignores the needs of other impacted personnel.
 - » If there are **fast actions that strengthen the chain of custody** and security such as locking the ballot room door on the way out, or taking the pollbook and ballots, you can suggest them. However, *you must prioritize safety*.²
 - If **the risk is genuine, but not immediate**, you can prioritize security and the chain of custody before leaving.
- Is there a risk of damage to election equipment or secure materials?
- Some situations such as a malfunctioning fire-suppression sprinkler, without any fire, may present a greater need to secure materials than people.
 - In these situations, materials and the chain of custody take priority.

Evacuating a Voting Site

While we stress the need to train staff and poll workers on evacuation protocols, it's important to remember that in an emergency, you may be speaking with someone with limited training and leadership experience. They may be in a panic.

You need to provide quick, simple guidance on how to handle the situation to ensure the safety of everyone present, and the security of voting materials to the degree possible. Having an evacuation checklist can help election workers if they are ordered to evacuate or decide to evacuate on their own. Considerations include:

1. Safety

Where safety is the priority, ask these questions:

- Has 911 been called?
- Have all those present been notified of the evacuation?
 - » How is the caller sure of this? (Good answers might be that they know the headcount, no one is visible in the voting room, and no poll workers went to the restroom.)
- Where should people evacuate to? Is their safety assured once they arrive?

2 See CISA's "Physical Security of Voting Sites and Election Facilities" https://www.cisa.gov/sites/default/files/2023-12/Physical%20Security%20of%20Voting%20Locations%20and%20Election%20Facilities_20230615_Final_508.pdf

- Can the person you're speaking with confirm that the evacuation is complete? If they cannot stay on the line, ask them to call back once they've safely exited – or get their number and call them back.

2. Chain of Custody

To preserve public confidence in the election, it's crucial to maintain the chain of custody of critical voting materials, ensuring compliance with state laws. If time is limited by the danger, consider prioritizing actions in the following order:

1. Voted ballots
2. The record of who has voted (list, e-list, or signed applications for ballot)
3. Voting equipment
4. Unvoted ballots

→ Ensuring that **the voted ballots and the list of voters who cast those ballots have not been altered or tampered with** will help protect the integrity of the process and strengthen voter confidence.

→ Being able to **document your claims of security** with photos of seals or signed documents from poll workers will give voters greater confidence.

3. Securing Other Materials, Identifying Voters Present

While voted ballots and a list of who has voted are the priority, other key procedures will facilitate a secure re-opening or transition to a new site.

- Record the names of voters present who were unable to vote.
 - » This can allow contact to ensure they are aware of alternatives and can affect a decision to extend voting hours.
- If it is challenging to move scanners or voting machines quickly:
 - » Have poll workers verify that all seals are present and take a picture with a phone if possible.
 - » Ensure port doors are locked and sealed.
- Put unvoted ballots away.
- Put away any affidavits and forms, whether signed or blank
- Lock or seal the container where they're stored.
- Take a picture of the voting room before leaving. This provides evidence that no materials were touched after poll workers left.
- Lock doors.



4. Alternatives for Voters

In addition to ensuring safety and maintaining chain of custody, you must provide options for voters who are disrupted to cast a ballot. While safety and security take precedence, providing an alternate voting site³ is also time-sensitive. The longer a site remains closed, the more likely some voters will be unable to vote. Know in advance what your state law allows for closing a voting site, relocation, and extension of voting.

- In an incident during early voting, providing new alternatives may be less critical.
 - » Consider how many options remain open, including other sites, other days, voting by mail, Election Day, and how wait times may be impacted.
- How quickly can the polling place return to use?
 - » If the disruption will be short, less than 30 minutes, the best option may be to ask poll workers to remain nearby and ask arriving voters to wait.
 - In the aftermath of a security event, law enforcement could seek to keep the site closed to secure evidence.⁴
 - Discuss how to handle such situations in advance, explaining the importance of having access to all voted ballots, critical records and equipment.
 - » If voters can't wait, capture data, like the names of any voters who can't wait. This may be useful in seeking extended hours from a judge.
- Can existing materials and equipment be moved to a nearby polling place?
- Do you have vote centers or sites whose materials allow voters from all over your jurisdiction to check in and cast ballots?
- How quickly can you prepare replacement voting equipment to stand up a new site?
- Can you make signage to redirect voters who arrive unaware of the change?

Planning for equipment breakdowns is part of normal election preparation, so backup equipment should be available if needed. We recommend identifying back-up sites ahead of time with consideration for how quickly you can activate them and how well they serve all the different areas in your jurisdiction.

Re-opening A Voting Site

Whether the original site reopens after a brief evacuation or a new site is established, poll workers should follow normal procedures for reopening, for instance, using the procedures from early voting for verifying seals and recording the ballots cast figure on the tabulator.

³ A detailed discussion of standing up a replacement voting site can be found in the [Toolkit for Polling Place Closures](#) from the Partnership for Large Election Jurisdictions.

⁴ Ibid.

Evacuating a Central Office or Warehouse

Evacuating your central office or the warehouse where you store and prepare voting equipment can be much more complicated than evacuating a voting site. The principles and initial stages are similar:

- **Triage the risk** to personnel and act with urgency.
- **Ensure chain of custody** of critical materials.
- Find sites to **continue all time-sensitive election processes**.

Key considerations include:

- Securing key areas while allowing access to emergency personnel.
- Maintaining your own access to critical management files.
- Ensuring staff have access to computers and relevant networks.
- Finding space for equipment preparation and secure storage.

Communicating About Evacuations

Communicating in emergencies is covered in depth in guides from [the Elections Group](#) and the Election Security Exchange (see the Additional Resources section for more information). Key communication points include:

- **Inform Voters:** Let affected voters know about alternate voting options using all practical approaches.
- **Set Expectations:** Provide an estimated end-time for the situation if confident.
- **Reassure the Public:** Explain how your security and chain of custody measures ensure that the votes already cast will be counted accurately and that tampering is prevented.

Preparation, Training & Practice for Evacuations

1. Preparation – Meeting with Security Partners

Meet with law enforcement and emergency management partners to build relationships, share information, and understand their decision-making processes.⁵

⁵ Guidance on holding a meeting with partners can be found in the guide [Election Security Working Group How To](https://securingelections.org/it-starts-with-a-team-building-your-election-security-working-group/) - <https://securingelections.org/it-starts-with-a-team-building-your-election-security-working-group/>, from the Election Security Exchange, and also in the “first step” of the [Five Steps to Safer Elections](https://safeelections.org/five-steps-to-protect-our-elections-from-the-committee-for-safe-and-secure-elections/) - <https://safeelections.org/five-steps-to-protect-our-elections-from-the-committee-for-safe-and-secure-elections/>, issued by the Committee for Safe and Secure Elections.



- **Ask:** Who makes the decision to evacuate a central facility or polling place in different situations?
- **Ask:** How should the decision be communicated?
- **Ask:** What support will partners provide?

2. Training and Practice for Central Facilities

Central facilities staff can be trained on where and how to evacuate, including:

- Appointing leads (for larger offices).
 - » Verifying that everyone in each unit is aware and leaving.
- The election official or senior deputy should verify leads are evacuating and take responsibility if a lead is absent.
- **Routes:** Set routes that avoid elevators and assist those with mobility issues.
- **Signage:** Display clear signs at strategic locations to guide staff during a crisis.
- **Rendezvous:** Set a meeting point outside the building.
- **Drills:** Hold evacuation drills at least once per year. Practice is critical to build muscle memory.

3. Training and Practice for Voting Sites

Recent threats, such as bomb threats targeting voting sites, make evacuation training essential. Consider covering the following topics in poll worker training:

- Situations requiring evacuation
- Identifying evacuation paths
- Posting clear signage for evacuation routes
- Ensuring all team members and voters evacuate
- Setting a rendezvous point outside
- Understanding chain of custody in emergency situations