

Swatting in Elections

A LAW ENFORCEMENT BRIEFING



This guide is a companion to CSSE's Combatting Swatting Attempts, aimed at election offices. This guide is for law enforcement. It focuses on what makes election settings unique when a swatting call comes in—and how those differences should shape your response.

Standard swatting protocols should apply to election incidents. What follows is what you need to know about swatting in election settings.

Five Steps to Safer Elections

CSSE's "Five Steps" is a framework for election and law enforcement agencies working together, with five simple principles:

— **Meet, Share, Agree, Plan, Practice** —

We suggest planning for swatting as part of a "Five Steps" process with your local election office.

1 MEET WITH YOUR ELECTION OFFICIAL

Elections in every state are run by local election officials.

- This may be an elected Clerk or similar title, with some local prominence; or an appointed administrator or board.
- Their home addresses are often publicly available on voter registration lists, making them easy targets for doxing, which makes swatting attacks possible.

Exchange contact information.

- Establish a working relationship with Election Officials before an event happens. You don't want to be trading business cards after an incident.
- Designate an election liaison in your department.
- Identify key election staff and flag their addresses in the Computer-Aided Dispatch (CAD) or other 911 database.

The relationship you build ahead of time may determine how quickly you can verify information in a crisis, to protect someone whose safety the integrity of the election depends on.

2 SHARE DETAILS OF YOUR OPERATING ENVIRONMENTS

Most important, recognize that election officials ARE being swatted.

- The threat is real. The chief state election officials in four states—from both parties—were swatted during the last national election.
- County clerks, board members and tabulation workers have all been targeted in recent years.

Swatting election officials is not a minor issue.

- Swatting is a crime showing intent, a tool to intimidate election officials and destabilize the election.

Swatting may emerge from a background of harassment.

- A background of harassment may help predict an increased risk of swatting or other physical security incidents.

Share your department's approach to swatting. Explain how law enforcement responds to a report of a critical incident, including a call that turns out to be swatting. Emphasize on-scene procedures, communication protocols and priorities so your local election official understands how to lessen the likelihood that a volatile situation develops.

Section 245(b)(1)(A) of US Code addresses interference in elections by force or threats. Many states have similar laws.

3

AGREE

ON PROTOCOLS FOR VERIFICATION & PROPORTIONATE RESPONSE

Standard protocol may call for a rapid, high-visibility response to reports of active violence. Swatting exploits that protocol.

Because swatting of election officials can be expected, a distinct protocol may be justified. For instance, consider an attempt to contact the election official at the address involved, which might help calibrate your understanding of the nature of the situation.

Consider the details of the call that may make it credible or not.

- Computer-altered voices or untraceable numbers may help characterize a call as unlikely to be genuine.

Discuss an identity verification protocol, such as:

- The dispatcher or liaison might attempt to reach the election official at a direct cell number kept in the CAD database.
- If call details or a talk with the election official make the dispatcher assess that the situation is not volatile, advise responding officers of the possibility of a swatting attempt.
- Involve your 911 authority board or incorporate them in planning.

In election settings, a verification step before full deployment can prevent a false call from becoming a real crisis.

4

PLAN

FOR SWATTING AS PART OF A LARGER WRITTEN PLAN FOR ELECTION SECURITY

Incorporate the steps discussed above into a written incident response plan developed in conjunction with the election office and emergency management.

The plan should address swatting as well as other possible situations ranging from weather and power outage to civil disturbance, bomb threats and other potential threats.

A pre-election memo can remind dispatch and officers that threat levels rise as an election approaches.

5

PRACTICE

YOUR PLANNED RESPONSE TOGETHER WITH THE ELECTION OFFICE

Add a swatting scenario to any existing tabletop exercise (TTX) or training being conducted for election security.

Ideally, the TTX will bring together dispatch, responding officers, and the election office liaison in the same room with election officials to practice coordinated response.