

## Guidelines for Law Enforcement Role at Public Meetings: Communication & De-Escalation Planning

A primary role of law enforcement is to provide for the security and safety of the public. As part of this role, law enforcement is often asked to attend and provide security at public meetings and forums where contentious topics may be debated or discussed. Law enforcement leaders and officers are typically able to assist with these types of events – supporting plans, creating incident command centers, planning for a number of scenarios and eventualities. An important element of these preparations and one that should be considered when developing plans is law enforcement’s role in de-escalating potentially volatile public meetings.

The International Association of Chiefs of Police defines de-escalation as,

“ [taking] action or communicating verbally or non-verbally during a potential force encounter in an attempt to stabilize the situation and reduce the immediacy of the threat so that more time, options, and resources can be called upon to resolve the situation without the use of force or with a reduction in the force necessary.<sup>1</sup> ”

Seen in this way, de-escalation can be an invaluable tool in a law enforcement response to emerging situations, creating additional options for a peaceful resolutions and minimizing the force needed to address threats. [Police organizations have developed useful trainings to support law enforcement use of de-escalations skills.](#)

Discussions around de-escalation training have increased in the wake of the national conversation in regards to police - community relations. Similar to the introduction of body-worn cameras, de-escalation training is quickly receiving vast support and promotion from politicians, academics, expert panels, and the public, who are eager to move “beyond what is legal and start focusing on what is preventable?”

This publication summarizes best practices and offers suggested guidelines for law enforcement to reduce use of violent force by the police, to enhance the safety of both officers and the public during their encounters, and to encourage collaboration among stakeholders to ensure community-wide safety at public sector meetings.

## Pre-Meeting

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- Develop direct relationships with board leaders and office staff for elected boards.
- Know the likely audience of the meeting and identify a primary point of contact with key community groups.
- Expect conflicting points of view and prepare for tolerance, patience, and de-escalation.
- Assess risk for conflict at the meeting based on publicly available data and identify potential groups who may pose a threat.
- Establish and agree on a response plan for differing levels of dissent or disagreement.
- Remind officers of their responsibility for protecting the first amendment rights of all. If the agency has a policy about taking pictures with members of the public, review that policy during roll call and pre-meeting preparation. Maintaining a non-biased approach can be important to defusing any potential conflict. Officers may have their own political beliefs and opinions, but their role is to protect the rights of the public and intervene should they need to, regardless of their personal opinions.
- Do not accept assistance with security from so-called militias or private groups. Review state laws regarding the legality of armed militia groups. Communicate to the public that paramilitary organizations have no authority to engage in law enforcement activities. [The Institute of Constitutional Advocacy and Protection has an online summary of state laws.](#)
- Prepare a De-Escalation Plan. The de-escalation plan should include a role for the Public Information Officer (PIO), who will be responsible for interfacing with the public, media, and other agencies in the event of a more contentious meeting.
- Liaise with the Board Chair to ensure a common voice. If the board chair is also working to protect space for civic discourse, defer to their lead and support their smooth running of the meeting. [A sample law enforcement guide for de-escalation can be found online at Seattle.gov.](#)

## Pre-Meeting (continued)

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- If meeting organizers are collaborating with local community leaders or civil society organizations who have been trained as unarmed de-escalators or safety units, then signal your support and respect for their work as the front-line.
- Have a planned response consistent with Incident Command and Integrated Action Plans (ICS/IAP) in case a serious event occurs.
- Inform Elected Officials of vital elements of the Incident Action Plan. Ensure that communication does not alarm officials but rather provides them with information and conveys that law enforcement is prepared to address the situation. Listen and modify plan, if appropriate, in response to any concerns raised by elected officials, especially in ways the plan may be misperceived
- Offer training for de-escalation, crisis intervention, and mental health awareness training. Training can be used to encourage officers to self-reflect, remain self-aware, and practice emotional regulation<sup>3</sup>. If de-escalation training has been provided, instruct supervisors to remind officers of key elements of de-escalation trainings at role call and in preparation for providing security at the meeting. If formal de-escalation training has not been provided, practice de-escalation techniques with officers periodically to increase awareness and understanding.

## During the Meeting

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- Actively maintain communication with staff who are hosting/facilitating the meeting.
- If requested, have a low-key presence at the meeting. Or remain entirely off-site and on-call, if other arrangements have been agreed upon for community safety (perhaps related to suggestions below). Consider a unit of unarmed officers as the public facing, front-line for your institution.
- If possible, monitor the meeting on CCTV/local cable access or remote access. This strategy permits a quick response without an overwhelming in-person law enforcement presence, which may heighten tensions.

## During the Meeting (continued)

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- Deter motor vehicle convoys and large groups of vehicles to avoid increased security risks such as ramming or motor vehicle accidents.
- Suggest alternative locations, not disbanding, if mobilizers are in unsafe areas, remembering the duty to ensure safe expression of 1st Amendment rights
- Be sure that law enforcement is content-neutral and unbiased. If forming a line between two groups, be sure to face both sides rather than only one.
- Law enforcement agencies should document delays and traffic obstructions if interference occurs. This evidence will be necessary to other branches of the justice system in crafting remedies to ensure public safety.
- If an incident occurs, utilize de-escalation strategies including controlling oneself (i.e. not taking it personally), and the environment (i.e. avoiding crowds), and using verbal (i.e. active listening) and non-verbal (i.e. open body language) techniques<sup>4</sup>. If appropriate, find other credible messengers to assist in de-escalation efforts that are consistent with guidelines.

## Post-Meeting

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- Debrief events and incorporate any lessons into plans for future meetings.
- Actively maintain communication with key personnel, including community members.
- Debrief with Board and learn more about their feeling of safety and concern and modify your plans for future meetings to address stated concerns.

## Reference Page

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1. International Association of Chiefs of Police (2017). National Consensus Policy and Discussion Paper on Use of Force. Alexandria, VA: Contributing Organizations. Retrieved from Engel, Robin S., et al. "Examining the impact of Integrating Communications, Assessment, and Tactics (ICAT) de-escalation training for the Louisville Metro Police Department: Initial findings." Center for Police Research and Policy (2020).
2. Engel, Robin S., Hannah D. McManus, and Tamara D. Herold. "Does de-escalation training work? A systematic review and call for evidence in police use-of-force reform." *Criminology & Public Policy* 19.3 (2020): 721-759.
3. Deveau, Lisa. "Police De-Escalation Training & Education: Nationally, Provincially, and Municipally." *Journal of Community Safety and Well-Being* 6.1 (2021): 2-5.
4. Peterson, Jillian, James Densley, and Gina Erickson. "Evaluation of 'the R-Model' crisis intervention de-escalation training for law enforcement." *The Police Journal* 93.4 (2020): 271-289.