



# CITY OF JANESVILLE

## *Wisconsin's Park Place*

### A GUIDANCE DOCUMENT ON DE-ESCALATING INCIDENTS AT THE VOTING LOCATION

Thank you for serving as a poll worker! You play a crucial role in ensuring our elections are secure, fair, and safe. In this environment of heightened interest, voters can be very passionate about candidates and issues, including current public health recommendations due to COVID-19. Voters may also become upset if they do not appear on the e-pollbook, are at the wrong polling place, forgot their identification, are otherwise required to vote a provisional ballot, or felt intimidated by observers or demonstrators outside the 100-foot electioneering limit. The following tips are intended to help you de-escalate situations that might arise at a voting location as you fulfill your primary responsibility of helping eligible Janesville voters to vote safely. Thank you again for your service to Janesville's voters.

#### GENERAL TIPS FOR DE-ESCALATION

##### → **Non-escalation techniques**

- Think about how much time you could save if you spent more time on NON-escalation vs. working on DE-escalation after the contact escalated
- Recognize the signs of conflict escalation
- SHOWTIME mindset – align communication with situation at hand
- Take a deep breath before speaking
- Go beyond active listening – clarify, reflect, advocate for better empathy

##### → **Use non-verbal techniques to help de-escalate.**

- Speak with a calm voice; control the volume and tone of your voice.
- Take slow and deep breaths; use kind language and gentle movements.
- Don't mirror defensive gestures, like crossed arms.
- Try to move the situation to a private area.
- Your calm behavior can be just as contagious as another person's negative emotions.

##### → **Listen, validate, and address the concern.** Most people want to know their concern is being heard.

- Listen. If possible, stop what you are doing, take a breath, and look at the voter as they present their concern. Try to remember details and refrain from interrupting or trying to finish their sentences. Take their viewpoint into consideration, even if you disagree.
  - Don't engage with underlying issues that may factor into the objection.
- Validate the person's emotions.
  - "This must be really difficult / frustrating / hard / uncomfortable for you."
  - "I understand you disagree with the policy/requirement."
  - "I appreciate your feedback."
- Address the concern, using one or more of the following:
  - Use positive and helpful statements: "I'm happy to help you safely vote."
  - Empathize:
    - "It can be hard to keep up with all the requirements and changes, but this is what our staff is being instructed to do today/this week and we appreciate your patience."
  - Remind the person that they will be allowed to vote. Let them know that your primary responsibility is to help eligible Janesville residents to vote, but they are being asked to comply with rules that ensure the election is orderly, safe and secure for all voters.

##### → **If the voter continues to escalate the situation, ask another poll worker to join the conversation.**

- If a voter refuses alternative options, escalate to the Chief Inspector to help resolve the situation or decide if it is necessary to call law enforcement.
- If you feel the safety of any person is in danger, however, call 911.

# De-escalation BASICS

## Overview

Poll workers are the backbone of our democracy and can play a key role in preventing, mitigating, and de-escalating potential tensions during the voting process. Planning and training can help create the conditions to minimize disturbances and distractions on Election Day and safely de-escalate disruptions.

## Key Principles

- Planning ahead makes your job easier in the moment
- Avoid arguing, ordering, or defensive postures
- De-escalate situations safely by drawing on CLARA (explained below!)

## Plan

### Planning ahead makes your job easier in the moment

- Think through potential scenarios with your fellow election administrators.
- Communicate rules and norms clearly: prominently display guidance on safety and security
- Familiarize yourself with [federal](#) and state laws and guidance on polling place disruptions and [unauthorized militia](#)
- Know who to contact in the event of a significant disruption or security concern and designate a worker, who will be the primary point-of-contact with law enforcement
- Debrief collectively after the event, including specifically on any security concerns

## Train

### Avoid arguments or actions that risk ESCALATING situations

- Remember the goal is not to win an argument but to calm verbal disruptions and prevent physical disruptions.
- While de-escalating

**Don't:** order, threaten, attempt to argue disinformation, or be defensive

**Do:**

- Request and Suggest Before Commanding or Demanding
- Be Clear, Simple and Specific with Requests
- Policy is not Personal: “state law does not allow” over “you are not allowed”

## Respond

### De-escalate situations safely by drawing on CLARA and other resources

**Calm and Center Yourself:** Check in with yourself, appear calm, centered, and self-assured even if you don't feel it. Avoid pointing, crossing your arms or other more aggressive postures

**Listen:** Let the person vent and be sure to listen explicitly for feelings, needs, or values.

**Acknowledge:** Begin by acknowledging the feelings, needs, or values you have heard. [Not about agreeing with their position, statement, or behavior.] ex. “I sense your aggravation at this situation. I hear your concern for safety.”

**Respond:** After acknowledgment, if there is further threat of harassment or violence, offer open ended or choice questions; address the issue; make a clear request or proposal. ex. “Will you tell me more about your concerns? “I understand you have every right to feel angry but it is not ok to threaten people here.”

**Assess:** Trust your instincts: If de-escalation is not working, STOP. Get Help.

# Can These Tips Help Me?

Here are 10 final tips to help you respond to difficult behavior in the safest, most effective way possible.

## TIP 1

### Be empathic and nonjudgmental.

When someone says or does something you perceive as weird or irrational, try not to judge or discount their feelings. Whether or not you think those feelings are justified, they're real to the other person. Pay attention to them. Keep in mind that whatever the person is going through, it may be the most important thing in their life at the moment.

## TIP 2

### Respect personal space.

If possible, stand 1.5 to three feet away from a person who's escalating. Allowing personal space tends to decrease a person's anxiety and can help you prevent acting-out behavior. If you must enter someone's personal space to provide care, explain your actions so the person feels less confused and frightened.

## TIP 3

### Use nonthreatening nonverbals.

The more a person loses control, the less they hear your words—and the more they react to your nonverbal communication. Be mindful of your gestures, facial expressions, movements, and tone of voice. Keeping your tone and body language neutral will go a long way toward defusing a situation.

## TIP 4

### Avoid overreacting.

Remain calm, rational, and professional. While you can't control the person's behavior, how you respond to their behavior will have a direct effect on whether the situation escalates or defuses. Positive thoughts like "I can handle this" and "I know what to do" will help you maintain your own rationality and calm the person down.

## TIP 5

### Focus on feelings.

Facts are important, but how a person feels is the heart of the matter. Yet some people have trouble identifying how they feel about what's happening to them. Watch and listen carefully for the person's real message. Try saying something like "That must be scary." Supportive words like these will let the person know that you understand what's happening—and you may get a positive response.

## TIP 6

### Ignore challenging questions.

Answering challenging questions often results in a power struggle. When a person challenges your authority, redirect their attention to the issue at hand. Ignore the challenge, but not the person. Bring their focus back to how you can work together to solve the problem.

## TIP 7

### Set limits.

If a person's behavior is belligerent, defensive, or disruptive, give them clear, simple, and enforceable limits. Offer concise and respectful choices and consequences. A person who's upset may not be able to focus on everything you say. Be clear, speak simply, and offer the positive choice first.

## TIP 8

### Choose wisely what you insist upon.

It's important to be thoughtful in deciding which rules are negotiable and which are not. For example, if a person doesn't want to shower in the morning, can you allow them to choose the time of day that feels best for them? If you can offer a person options and flexibility, you may be able to avoid unnecessary altercations.

## TIP 9

### Allow silence for reflection.

We've all experienced awkward silences. While it may seem counterintuitive to let moments of silence occur, sometimes it's the best choice. It can give a person a chance to reflect on what's happening, and how he or she needs to proceed. Believe it or not, silence can be a powerful communication tool.

## TIP 10

### Allow time for decisions.

When a person is upset, they may not be able to think clearly. Give them a few moments to think through what you've said. A person's stress rises when they feel rushed. Allowing time brings calm.