mayors innovation project

LEADING UNDER PRESSURE: PROTECTING ELECTED OFFICIALS

WINTER 2026 POLICY MEETING
JANUARY 30-31 · WASHINGTON DC

Violence and harassment against local public officials in the United States is on the rise, and more frequent and impactful for women and leaders of color. In 2024, the Bridging Divides Initiative saw a 14% increase in threats and harassment against local elected officials from 2023 and a 74% increase from 2022. This trend is especially startling for mayors, often their municipality's most visible and accessible elected officials, who lack the budgets, training, or public/political will to address the rise in violence. In this session, we'll share updated data on these trends, offer resources to combat them, and invite you to contribute to a discussion of potential solutions.



DISCLAIMER

For length, clarity, and printing purposes, many of these sources have been abbreviated and/or edited from their original form. To read the full, unabbreviated resources from this book, please visit our website or view them on the usb drive provided in your meeting materials.

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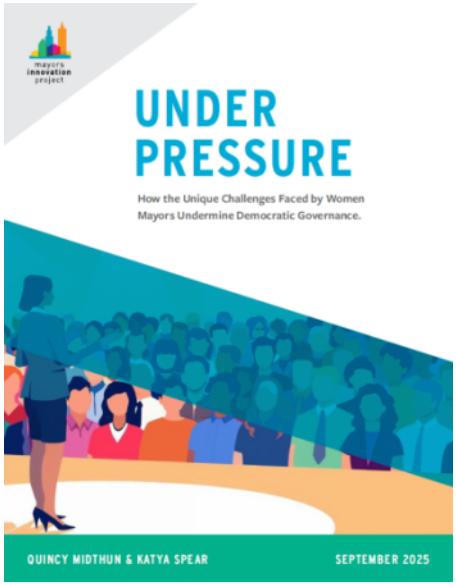


Under Pressure: How the Unique Challenges Faced by Women Mayors Undermine Democratic Governance

Over the course of our 20 year history as an organization, we've heard countless stories from women mayors that inspired us to study and document the challenges and systemic barriers that mayors face while campaigning and in office. With support from the Barbara Lee Family Foundation (https://barbaraleefoundation.org/), we launched a research project in the spring of 2024 aimed at better understanding the experiences of women as they campaign for and govern as mayor.

Through this work, we hope to raise awareness about the challenges women mayors face, demonstrate a need for additional research and broader dialogue on their impact, and inspire action to support women in executive leadership.

Download the full report. (https://mayorsinnovation.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/868/2025/10/Under-Pressure_Final-Sept.-2025.pdf)

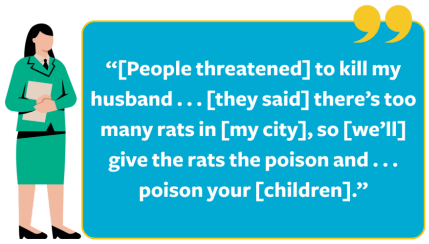


Executive Summary

This report, produced by the Mayors Innovation Project's Women Mayors Network (https://mayorsinnovation.org/our-work/women-mayors-network/), explores the unique challenges faced by women mayors across the United States through a national survey and in-depth interviews. The findings reveal that women mayors reported more frequent and severe harassment than their male counterparts, both during campaigns and while in office. They also faced disproportionate criticism related to their appearance, competence, emotional state, and family responsibilities, often navigating a "double bind"—at times being perceived as too weak and at other times too strong. These experiences not only impact the personal well-being of women mayors but require them to devote extra time and energy refocusing attention to their work.

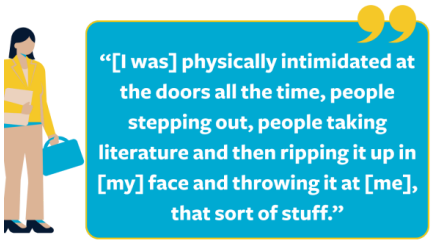
Despite these challenges, the report highlights the resilience and determination of women in mayoral roles and the solutions to address the barriers that women face. Many women mayors continue to serve their communities with distinction, often relying on peer support networks and professional development opportunities. However, resilience alone is not a sustainable solution. Systemic changes—including equitable pay, improved safety measures, supportive staffing, and inclusive policies—are needed to reduce barriers and foster a more representative and effective local government. By addressing these issues, cities can better support women in leadership and strengthen democratic governance at the local level.

Key Themes and Stark Statistics



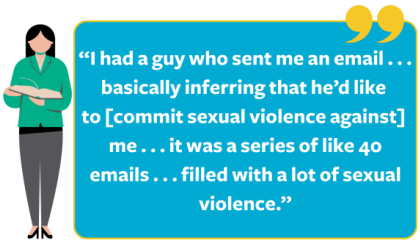
Threats to Family

While campaigning, 29% of women mayors reported threats and harassment to their family compared to 19% of men. Nearly twice (39%) as many women reported threats and harassment to their family compared to men (20%).



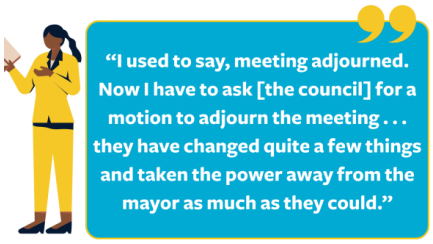
Threats and Harassment

A shocking 84% of women mayors reported experiencing harassment while on the campaign trail, compared to 64% of men. In office, 25% of women mayors reported being harassed at least three times a month, more than double the rate for men (10%).



Sexual Harassment

Women reported experiencing sexual harassment significantly more than their male peers. While campaigning, 41% of women reported experiencing sexual harassment, compared to 6% of men. While governing, 40% of women reported experiencing sexual harassment compared to 5% of men.



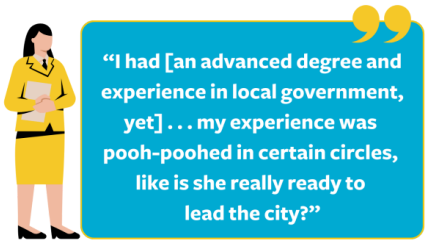
Challenges to Authority

As mayor, 19% of women mayors reported experiencing attempts to limit their authority compared to 16% of men. Nine percent of women mayors reported experiencing refusal of city staff or subordinates to perform the basic duties of their job compared to 6% of men, and 11% of women compared to 6% of men reported experiencing attempts by council or staff to scrutinize or limit their travel budget or schedule.



Criticism of Physical Appearance

Women mayors reported experiencing such criticism on the campaign trail and in office at over double the rate as men, with 52% of women reporting experiencing criticism while campaigning compared to 25% of men. As mayor, 43% of women reported experiencing criticism of their appearance compared to 18% of men.



Questions about ability to do the job

On the campaign trail, 19% of women experienced questions about their ability to do the job related to their identity compared to 10% of men. In office, 20% of women mayors reported experiencing questions about their ability to do the job related to their identity while governing compared to just 9% of men, implying that their gender, marital status, or family composition somehow made them unfit to serve.

Implications for Democracy

These barriers make it difficult for women to get elected, create hostile environments once they are in office, and ultimately discourage them from staying in their positions or seeking higher office. Our data indicates that the persistent underrepresentation of women in the role of the mayor is not due to a lack of qualification but rather to systemic barriers, which result in enormous personal costs to women. Barriers include a lack of access to financial networks and political patronage, negative stereotypes in media, online harassment, threats to physical safety, and a lack of traditional recruitment methods targeted towards women. These barriers cost women time on the job, time with their families, income that they would otherwise earn at other jobs, personal privacy, security, and their mental and physical health. Once in office, both legal and cultural challenges to women's authority inhibits their ability to lead at their full capacity.

But this is not just a problem for women.

This is a problem for everyone—underrepresentation of women in elected office is a problem for our democracy. As barriers discourage women from running or push women out of office, communities lose out on qualified leaders. Research (https://unhabitat.org/news/29-jun-2023/women-led-cities-pioneering-a-path-to-gender-equality) from the United Nations confirms that when women lead, they propose and pass more equitable policies and services that focus on social issues such as healthcare, education, and community development, leading to a higher quality of life for all residents. Furthermore, studies (https://womendeliver.org/why-women-in-politics/) consistently show that women are more likely to work across party lines and lead collaboratively. The good news is that actively supporting women in public office can strengthen our democracy. Many resources—time, energy, and a considerable amount of money—are spent reinforcing systemic barriers to women's political leadership. The data and experiences shared in this report and across a number of other studies demonstrates that investing resources to support women in government is a powerful way to boost representation, advance policies that improve people's lives, and bolster a democracy that is flagging.

Nevertheless, She Persisted

> *Despite the overwhelming systemic and individual barriers that women mayors face, female survey respondents reported that they would encourage others to run for mayor at nearly identical rates to male respondents—79% of women and 80% of men said they would encourage others to run for office.*
>
> —Under Pressure

Solutions

Women have found ways to succeed in the role and make progress in the cities they serve, and they are eager to share these tools and strategies with current and upcoming women mayors. Many women mayors expressed that they wished someone had been honest about the reality of all that comes with being a woman in the office of the mayor and how they could prepare for it.

In interviews and our survey, we asked women mayors what strategies, tools, resources, and practices have helped support them. Answers ranged from family support to therapy to faith communities to a daily exercise regimen.



While having support from fellow female electeds is wonderful, **asking women to be resilient and rely on each other is neither an adequate nor a sustainable response to the barriers they face each day.** There are tangible policy responses that can be put in place to lessen the burden placed on women in elected office. For the job to be more accessible to women, women mayors shared that they needed more resources, including increased pay and benefits, childcare, security, funding for professional development and networking opportunities, and funding for supportive staff.

What can local governments do?

Offer support and/or professional development

There is a pervasive misperception of mayors taking advantage of travel opportunities related to training and professional development, often referred to as "vacations" or "junkets," borne out by little data. Professional conferences and training programs for local elected leaders are a great opportunity to share city successes, learn from peers, and bring back resources and ideas to your city.

Support staff dedicated to the mayor

A number of women that we interviewed called out having good, supportive staff as key to feeling supported professionally. We recommend broad support for mayors having staff dedicated to them.

Demystify the process and promote civic engagement

Create and reimagine opportunities for constituents, especially women and people of color, that demystify the process and promote civic engagement. Examples include Civic Academies and participatory budgeting processes. The majority of the public does not understand what local governments—including the mayor—actually do and have authority over. Educating the public about civic processes and roles can help build trust in government and develop new pathways for people to engage with their local government.

Support women and families with policy

Anti-harassment policies and procedures, paid leave policies, and access to childcare services are key for making the role of the mayor accessible to women and people of color.

Encourage collaborative, respectful communication among council

Dedicate time and space to city council retreats and other opportunities to encourage collaborative, respectful communication. It's hard to recruit good candidates when your elected body is—or is perceived as—divisive and combative. Council retreats offer an opportunity for the elected body to

What can you do?

Support reasonable increases in safety and security

Many mayors we spoke to shared that when they pursued efforts to increase security of their home, office, or themselves, they were met with pushback of the actions being excessive, combative, or self-serving. Many have resorted to using their own money to litigate cases related to their position, hire personal security, or increase their security—necessitated by their role—at home or at work. In light of the many instances of physical and psychological threats, harassment, and actions documented here and in other research (and the media) recently, it's critical to build public and media support for reasonable requests for safety-related staffing and infrastructure in a way that does not hinder the democratic process.

Challenge (and address) your own biases

Members of the public and the media should undergo implicit bias training to confront their own unconscious biases, which everyone has. Related biases include not just obvious references to gender and race, but also to family structure, marital status, and appearance. The media should focus exclusively on qualifications and impact—there is simply no reason for news stories to reference a mayor or mayoral candidate's appearance, clothing, or family structure.

Call out bias when you see or hear it

On social media, in mainstream media, in public spaces, equip yourself with the skills to identify bias and to challenge it. This is especially important for those with some form of implicit power, influence, and visibility: others in elected office—especially white men, the media, businesses owners, etc.

Engage with local government

Attend council meetings and budget hearings, inquire about civic engagement opportunities, serve on a committee, understand the different roles and powers of your local government, and/or consider running for local office. Local

come together to focus on process over policy, to get to know one another as human beings, and to create norms and standards for conduct in political office that benefit the wider community.

Conduct pay equity disparity studies and raise wages

While strong, full time mayors and mayors in larger cities tend to receive higher pay, many of the women we spoke with—regardless of form of government or city size—are not paid anything close to a living wage. Local governments should undertake a pay equity study, which analyzes job duties alongside qualifications, experience, and pay to assess wage gaps based on characteristics like gender and race. Higher and fairer wages increase access to local political office, attract talent, and help reduce disproportionate challenges in running for and serving in office identified here, such as financial barriers and unpaid caregiving responsibilities.

Consider adopting or enacting Ranked Choice Voting

If allowed in your state, consider adopting or enacting Ranked Choice Voting (RCV). RCV allows voters to rank candidates in order of preference; if one candidate receives more than half of the initial ballots, they win. If not, the candidate with the fewest votes is eliminated and the voters who picked that candidate as their first choice have their second choice counted. This continues until a candidate exceeds the 50 percent threshold. Data in localities using RCV have shown an increase in women and people of color running in—and winning—elections. A report (https://www.representwomen.org/rcv_day_memo_jan_2023) by RepresentWomen found that cities with RCV systems elect more women than cities with traditional plurality voting systems, suggesting that RCV is an effective way to encourage fairer elections with more representative and equitable outcomes.

government is the truest and most intimate form of local democracy, and everyone benefits from increased engagement and understanding

UTH REPORT

Responding to Threats and Harassment Against Local Government

How are officials mitigating risk, and what can we do to support them?

OCTOBER 2024

Bridging Divides Initiative

BDI is a non-partisan research initiative at Princeton University that tracks and mitigates political violence in America.

bridgingdivides.princeton.edu

Executive Summary

Over the past two years, BDI has conducted interviews with more than 150 local elected officials to gain a deeper understanding of the impact of threats and harassment on local government. These conversations have painted a concerning picture of hostility at the local level, but they have also revealed the wide array of tools officials are leveraging to respond to threats and harassment. Analyzing the variety of risk mitigation strategies surfaced throughout the interview research, this report breaks down five key response types that were consistently highlighted by officials at the frontlines of local government.

- **Individual strategies:** Personal behavioral changes that can be made in response to, or to be prepared for, hostility.
- **Peer support:** Networks with other local officials that can help to navigate the difficult experiences of hostility.
- **Connections with town administrators and service providers:** Community relationships with policy makers, other non-elected staff, and local law enforcement that can support threat assessment and response.
- **Official procedures and community outreach approaches:** Ways to leverage the resources of local government to effectively and safely engage with constituents.
- **Legal and security options:** Frameworks for when and how to elevate credible threats.

Overall, officials articulated a deep commitment to serve their communities and resolve conflict constructively, even in the face of threats and harassment. Focused on steps that are within their direct control, they have developed a range of creative, resilient approaches aimed at managing the symptoms of the current climate of hostility and mitigating immediate short-term risks. At the same time, officials also underscored the need for systems-wide solutions that would enable local government to move out of this hostile climate over the long term. The insights from these interviews offer guidance, lessons, and best practices for other officials navigating hostile situations, and can inform further research into curative interventions to protect local democracy and civic space going forward.

Recommendations

The report findings identify multiple areas where government, civil society, community leaders, and other stakeholders can better support local officials — and officials can better support each other — to address hostility now and in the future.

1. Providing greater assistance to candidates and new officials to build trusted support systems that center their reasons for serving in office.

2. Providing greater investment in regional peer-to-peer networks.

3. Establishing new or specific training programs for city attorneys, town managers, and law enforcement personnel on approaches to mitigating threats and harassment.

4. Ensuring training on local governance procedures continues to be widely and freely available, augmented by modules on managing contentious topics and situations.

5. Developing clear, easily accessible guidance on the types of hostility that warrant legal or law enforcement action across different contexts and jurisdictions, as well as alternative strategies for cases that are "just below the line."

6. Ensuring resources — especially for therapy, physical security, de-escalation training, and out-of-state network opportunities — are reaching officials less traditionally connected to these tools.

7. Collaborating on whole-of-society solutions to push back on the climate of hostility and the normalization of threats over the long term.

Introduction and Background

Since 2022, the Bridging Divides Initiative (BDI), in collaboration with CivicPulse, has undertaken quarterly surveys reaching out to a representative sample of over 3,500 local officials to better understand the scope, scale, and trends of hostility over time. From these surveys, over 150 officials have opted to participate in further in-depth interviews with BDI, contributing to research that reveals the individual impacts of threats and harassment as well as the range of ways officials are responding to hostility. These officials have included city council members, township trustees, county commissioners, and school board members.

Conversations with local officials over this two-year period have painted a concerning picture of hostility at the local level. Officials describe the negative downstream effects of rising national polarization on local government as well as heightened tensions between constituents and colleagues. These trends have contributed to an environment where local officials often feel isolated and alone, and frequently feel that they are forced to manage hostile situations alone, putting increasing strain on local government.

Reports that local officials feel unable to perform their role safely — and in some cases are actively changing their behavior to avoid potential hostility — are particularly worrying for the health of local democracy. These trends dovetail with fears articulated by many local officials about a dwindling pipeline of interested community members willing to run for local office, which they argue can ensure that only the most "extreme" voices feel comfortable seeking election and governing. These findings are corroborated by our quarterly surveys with CivicPulse as well as research from the Brennan Center for Justice — part of BDI's broader collaborative, mixed methods approach to understand the impacts of threats and harassment on local officials.

Rationale and Methodology: Focusing in on Local Officials' Response Strategies

While local officials have consistently described the negative effects of heightened hostility levels throughout the interview program, they have also identified an array of steps both colleagues and constituents can take to push back on threats and harassment.

In the course of the interviews, officials were asked to share any risk mitigation strategies they have employed or recommend, as well as advice for other officials facing hostile situations. BDI researchers then analyzed the replies to create overarching categories of response types identified by the officials. This report focuses primarily on first-step mitigation strategies flagged by local officials: approaches that are largely within an official's direct control to implement — while also aiming to surface additional strategies that officials might not have considered or that could benefit from wider community and government support. The research elevates diverse, creative, and at times even defiant responses in an

effort to shed light on the full spectrum of models available to officials facing hostile situations.

This report also highlights response gaps where local officials have frequently requested more assistance. Officials often raised concerns about the root causes of the hostile climate in their conversations with BDI researchers, which they pegged to a variety of issues like national polarization, social media, and social disruption due to the pandemic. However, they not only focused more on what was in their direct control to change, but also asked explicitly for strategies and resources to help them mitigate current risk factors now. In this way, while officials consistently underscored the importance of rebuilding trust and civility within their communities over the medium and long term, their advice for colleagues — and their requests for support — broadly centered on both reactive and proactive steps they had the power to take in the short term to address immediate threats affecting their personal and professional lives.

Not all officials who participated in the interviews have directly experienced hostility themselves. For example, across interviews conducted in all four quarters of 2023, approximately 20% of participants reported that they had not experienced threats, harassment, or attacks. Even among these officials, however, many had witnessed hostility faced by other colleagues and acknowledged the broader climate of hostility in which they worked. BDI researchers spoke to any local official willing to take part in the interview program in order to include the fullest possible range of experiences and insights. Each interviewee shared observations and lessons from their own experience.

Of the 150 interviewees, 44.5% of respondents were women and 52.7% men. Regionally, 26.7% of interviewees were from the West, 28% the Midwest, 16.7% from the South, and 26.7% from the Northeast. Politically, 52.7% of interviewees identified as Democrats, 19.3% as Republican, and 24% as Independent or another party. Elected officials of color made up 12% of the interview pool. Our interviewees cross age groups: one interviewee is between 24-28, 2% are between 29-33, 3.3% are between 34-38, 4.7% are between 39-43, 9.3% are between 44-48, 8.7% are between 49-53, 10.7% are between 49-53, 13.3% are between 54-58, 20% are between 59-63, 13.3% are between 64-68, 6.7% are between 69-73 and 2.7% are between 74-78.[1]

This research builds on the first report from BDI's interview program, which analyzed the effects and mechanisms of hostility at the local level, to provide further insights into the approaches local officials are taking to counter these threats.

[1] These percentages do not always add up to 100% as some interviewees declined to report demographic data.

Key Response Types

As public servants and representatives of their communities, local officials consistently articulated a deep and abiding responsibility to address any and all issues they saw as related to their role, ranging from hostility, to disagreements with other officials, to overall challenges associated with being a "public figure." Many indicated an eagerness to address these issues independently, amid worries about burdening friends, family, and constituents.

Officials stressed that it is often unclear if there is an "acceptable" level of hostility due to their role and public position, and questioned how to determine that threshold. In some cases, this ambiguity has led to situations where officials who need support do not reach out soon enough.

When officials do seek support, it is evident from the interviews that there is no "one size fits all" solution to hostility, given the hyperlocality of many incidents and the individual threat assessments and experiences of targeted officials (i.e. their demographics or professional backgrounds). Women and people of color in office experience disproportionate rates of threats and harassment, for example, relative to their counterparts. Sadly, these officials described how their baseline experiences with sexism and racism "prepared" them to face targeted hostility about their identities when they took office. Local officials who reported receiving de-escalation training as a prior member of law enforcement, or those who had a previous career in social work, described higher levels of comfort in dealing with sometimes tense interactions with constituents. But not all officials have training or past experiences that set expectations or helped ready them for the current level of hostility so many now face, and even those that do will require further support to counter threats and keep themselves and their families safe. It is therefore critical to elevate a variety of different response models and resources to facilitate threat assessment and mitigation in the short term, while simultaneously advancing larger whole-of-society solutions to this climate of hostility over the long term.

Over two years of conversations, local officials pointed to steps and approaches that can be categorized within five key response themes for addressing the heightened environment of threats and harassment. These include:

1. **Individual strategies**: Personal behavioral changes that can be made in response to, or to be prepared for, hostility.
2. **Peer support**: Networks with other local officials that can help to navigate the difficult experiences of hostility.
3. **Connections with town administrators and service providers**: Community relationships with policy makers, other non-elected staff, and local law enforcement that can support threat assessment and response.

4. **Official procedures and community outreach approaches**: Ways to leverage the resources of local government to effectively and safely engage with constituents.
5. **Legal and security options**: Frameworks for when and how to elevate credible threats.

Each theme is explored in more depth below.

I. Individual Strategies

Over half of interviewed local officials described making personal behavioral changes to respond to threats or harassment — both those who chose to make changes themselves or per recommendations by other elected officials experiencing hostility. These kinds of changes included both online and offline security measures, as well as changes to their personal approach to service: restricting their social media usage; getting personal security for their homes; or changing their engagement with and attitude towards criticism and potential hostility. More than one in five interviewees reported making such changes as the *only* strategy they have so far employed to manage threats and harassment, while an additional third reported making such changes *in addition to* other strategies. Personal changes were typically the "first step" made by local officials dealing with threats and harassment, though in some cases they were also perceived as the sole recourse available. For example, for those dealing with online harassment, behavioral changes on social media were often seen as the *only* option.

As an initial preparatory step, officials recommended **recentering on their personal motivations for service amid potential hostility situations, stressing the necessity of mentally readying for the public scrutiny that can come with being an official**. Officials regularly noted the importance of finding ways to navigate or de-escalate tense interactions with colleagues and constituents that may not rise to the level of hostility, or have the potential to escalate. Several officials stated that consistent self reminders about why they serve, as well as efforts to keep their core "values first" and top of mind, were instrumental for weathering tense and potentially hostile situations. "If you feel that strongly [about why you're serving]," one official said, "then you stay and fight." Another emphasized the need to pair that commitment to service with a sustained focus on the longer-term impact of the work that they do in the face of immediate threats and harassment: "You need to ride out the storm for a brighter horizon."

Many also described the importance of **having a "team" around them — such as trusted family, friends, allies, and local partners — who they could call and rely upon for support and guidance in challenging circumstances**, ranging from threats and harassment to regular local office issues. "Something like this will happen to you," one official said. "When it does, take a deep breath, don't panic… Talk to your spouse if you have one, talk to trusted advisors, talk to responsible local officials. Keep it small, don't overreact, and don't post on social media — that's the first thing."

Worryingly, some officials reported **changing and shifting how they presented their stances on contentious issues so that they would not attract vitriol and hostility.** Officials described that some of the most contentious issues they faced were about hyperlocal topics like roads and zoning laws, and that hostility at times influenced the kinds of stances they took. Some even indicated that they changed their position to avoid being threatened or harassed. In other cases officials described behavioral changes that included not sharing their position as actively on social media and not speaking up as often in council meetings. As one local official put it in an April 2024 interview, there are "so many" threats and harassment incidents "every day" that officials have no opportunity to defend themselves — resulting in them "not [wanting] to put themselves out there." Hyperlocal issues as described by interviewed officials were typically not "Republican or Democrat" issues: this created common ground for cooperation across the aisle but, when hostility did intensify around these topics, it often defied simple partisan "polarization" explanations. These trends underscore the need — and opportunity — for holistic, multi-partisan interventions to push back on the climate of hostility over the longer term.

Local officials described various **strategies for protecting their physical safety, especially in their homes**. Officials cited concerns about their own safety as well as the safety of their spouses and children, and often took these steps after their address had been circulated online via social media. Strategies include putting in place or enhancing existing security systems, registering for local offices using a business or P.O. box to protect their home address, and asking local law enforcement to do "drive-bys" of their homes in case of an elevated threat. As one local official put it, "I bought my house in a trust that masks my name and got a P.O box so that all public interfacing is not where I live…[I] talked to the cops about it quite a bit." Occasionally, local officials, especially those in more isolated or rural areas where there were concerns about a timely law enforcement response, stated that they had guns in their homes and saw them as a means of protection *(more on firearms in Section V below).*

II. Peer Support

Over a third of interviewed officials described relying on other local officials to help them navigate the difficult experiences of threats and harassment. Local officials regularly praised their colleagues for leadership and support — even those that sat across the aisle from them. Critically, **constructive relationships with other local officials had some of the highest levels of satisfaction as a proactive mitigation strategy for dealing with threats and harassment**, even if there were some challenges with gaining access to that support.

Specifically, many officials described the importance of **forming personal connections with those that they worked with, even if they fundamentally disagreed with them politically, to help mitigate contentious activity and hostility**. Officials explained that connecting with

"veteran" colleagues and "people who were willing to mentor them, who were sounding boards, [who could] run interference," particularly for new or young officials, was critical. Officials highlighted the impact of positive experiences where colleagues stood up for them during a meeting, on social media, or in the "public square," especially in cases involving support from an official with a different political affiliation. "There are going to be people in the administration that you'll get along great with, others that have flaws — human flaws. Work with those flaws, accept them," another official said. "There may come times with impossible situations, contrary people. But if you can take them to lunch, if you can establish some kind of relationship outside, that can carry you through." As further evidence of the importance of cross-party support, several officials attributed their positive experiences on councils and their continued stay in office at least in part to instances of "positive turnover" — where collegial councilmembers replaced contentious ones.

Some officials identified negative side effects of "Sunshine Laws" that created obstacles to forging connections with other officials. The Government in the Sunshine Act is a law intended to provide greater transparency in government by requiring that meetings be in public and with advanced notice. However, a review by the Associated Press and CHNI News described related open meeting laws as a "hodgepodge of cumbersome rules" with uneven enforcement at the state level, and interviewed officials expressed concern that these regulations at times limit how elected officials can or are willing to engage with one another outside of open meetings. Officials meeting with one another in non-public spaces or without advanced public notice could be seen as violating these laws, even when meetings may have been organized in an effort to address challenging experiences like threats and harassment. Officials did not dispute the importance of increasing government transparency through such legislation, but noted that the current framework can make it difficult to talk to their peers about contentious issues, or form more collegial relationships, without running afoul of these restrictions. One official, who faced harassment and knew their colleagues had also received similar harassment, said they found themselves in a situation where they were "not allowed to speak to each other [about what they experienced] because of Sunshine Laws."

To overcome these hurdles and ensure they would not be in violation of Sunshine Laws or other similar restrictions, **local officials highly recommended building relationships with officials in similar positions in *nearby* communities, instead of — or in addition to — their own community.** One local official reported that before starting their first term, they set up meetings with as many local officials in similar positions in neighboring counties as possible to learn the job and to be prepared as issues arose. "I'd give them the same advice that I received during my first term in office," one interviewee said of new officials facing hostility. "Find a colleague in a neighboring city. I had to hear it from someone else outside of my silo, that I didn't have to put up with that. Think of yourself as a regional representative, work with colleagues regionally to diminish the effect of what's happening within your own council…I took myself out of my silo, into a bigger arena, and it didn't bother me as much

because I felt I had so many new colleagues now." These relationships ultimately serve multiple purposes: providing support in the face of threats and harassment, and a bedrock of partnerships for newly elected officials starting out in a more polarized climate.

State and national organizing groups that bring together officials from across the country can provide a means for local officials to build supportive relationships, especially for those who do not have pre-existing local networks. Many of the interviewed officials shared high levels of satisfaction with support from these groups. Examples of programs and organizations mentioned specifically by officials included:

- The National League of Cities, an organization of city, town, and village leaders, representing more than 2,700 cities across the United States, and its state chapters;
- The National Association of Counties, serving 3,069 county governments, 40,000 county elected officials, and 3.6 million county employees
- Washington Lt. Gov. Danny Heck's bipartisan local governance initiative, "Common Ground for Common Good," and its Civic Health Summit of 2023

Local officials reported favorably on training and convening opportunities from these groups that helped them prepare for meetings, run their social media, engage with constituents, and understand what options were available to them in case they were targeted by legal or criminal misconduct.

Some officials also described how, upon becoming a public figure, they felt they "lost" their right to privacy and vocalized a need to develop policies that would restore those rights within First Amendment protections. Resources like the digital security guides developed by researchers with the UNC School of Government and Right to Be, which have a particular focus on how local officials can deal with harassment while adhering to the First Amendment, can be effective tools for officials in these contexts.

III. Connections with Town Administrators and Service Providers

Nearly two out of five officials identified community relationships with government officials and other non-elected staff — in positions different than their own — as a source of comfort in their own role, as well as a source of aid when facing threats and harassment. In particular, officials noted the importance of building such relationships *before* a problem occurred, so that they would have support in the event of hostility. Officials noted how having partnerships with town managers, city attorneys, mayors, different boards within government, law enforcement, and other staff personnel helped them to feel more confident knowing *who* to go to help them deal with different situations and to know when to escalate a problem.

Seven **local officials specifically highlighted the importance of city attorneys and town managers for addressing persistent problems** (e.g. a member of the community who

regularly harassed officials over a period of multiple years). These connections helped them to "know their rights" when handling hostile situations. The institutional knowledge of how individuals or problems had been addressed in the past also offered officials support across different kinds of threat or harassment challenges.

Officials described the importance of establishing relationships with local law enforcement. Over a quarter of local officials reported that they sought or engaged law enforcement when they experienced threats or harassment, or that they would do so should they experience such hostility. For example, after dealing with some particularly disturbing threats, several officials described having local law enforcement conduct drive-bys of their homes, or escort them out to their cars. "Text the sheriff and get the number of the deputy on duty, have officers come to meetings," one official recommended. "I think it's good to build a relationship with cops." Many noted how the tight-knit nature of local communities is what helped them — or would help them, in the future — to feel comfortable to reach out to law enforcement. Some local officials had relatives who served in their community's sheriff or city police divisions, for example. An official in this situation recommended law enforcement as the first step of response to any serious incident — "If a more credible threat, go straight to law enforcement. In a small town, go straight to them. You know them just by living in the town." — but acknowledged that these kinds of relationships are "a privilege a lot of people don't have" and are not a universal solution. Overall, the majority of local officials who engaged with law enforcement reported positively on their interactions and saw them as an important part of their response network. Many officials who had not yet faced threats or harassment indicated that reaching out to law enforcement would be an approach they would strongly consider *(more on security responses in Section V below)*.

However, other officials reported feeling dismissed and not listened to by law enforcement, especially after experiencing severe incidents of hostility, such as threats of physical violence against themselves or a family member. Of officials who experienced threats or harassment and did reach out to law enforcement, at least five reported feeling outrage and dismay when they were told by law enforcement that there was very little they could do to help them "until physical violence actually occurred." In certain cases, officials reported that law enforcement personnel were themselves the source of harassment in their community, further isolating local officials with limited options for recourse and raising the question: if law enforcement cannot be trusted to address threats or harassment, where should local officials turn? One local official described a situation where law enforcement completely dismissed a case of racist harassment and refused to take down death threats. In response, the official's friends and community members began to act as "security" for them at meetings, as an alternative to police. Women and officials of color sometimes reported complex experiences with law enforcement: while most maintained positive and productive working relationships with local authorities, several officials described the opposite. For example, one official discussed having a constructive texting relationship with their chief of police, while another official described a situation where, during efforts to

discipline a police officer, the officer harassed the official and their spouse until the official was able to convince the chief of police to remove the officer from duty (though individual in question still lives in town). Cases like these underscore the fact that, in many contexts, connections with local authorities are not a sufficient or viable response strategy alone.

IV. Official Procedures and Community Outreach Approaches

One in 10 officials described the importance of effectively using all of the administrative resources and procedures at their disposal to set up and enforce a positive climate in their community's civic spaces and to reduce the risk of threats and harassment. Community meetings, as many local officials noted, are often the first point of engagement with constituents and they set the tone for discourse around contentious issues. Local officials cited the negative impact of poorly run meetings on community climate. These included meetings that do not enforce time limits, for example, or do not stick to the agenda, as well as those that allow "pet issues" of elected officials to dominate proceedings, to the detriment of topics important for the wider community.

Setting clear agenda items and expectations — and sticking up for other local officials or constituents who face threats or harassment during meetings — was identified by many interviewees as an effective strategy for creating a climate of constructive civic engagement that reduced the risk of hostility. For example, knowing the rules of local meetings via an understanding of "parliamentary procedure" was highly recommended by more than 10 officials during interviews, because meetings can quickly spiral into unproductivity and uncivil engagement without clear leadership from presiding officials. Establish clear rules that "encourage public comment, but not a back and forth," one official recommended, saying that a "set comment period eliminates going back and forth about unresolved things, and allows people to be heard."

Ensuring that the meeting's focus (and perceived focus) is on the local community, rather than a specific official's individual political agenda, is essential, as the latter can detract from the ability of a council to govern effectively and can give rise to disputes. Officials noted that transparency, including creating opportunities for community input, can be an effective means of encouraging civil engagement and reducing confusion that can contribute to tension. "Try to be as open as possible with anything that remotely might seem contentious or might get people upset," one official suggested. "Try to be very open and honest, and don't try to do anything without public notice." Another official emphasized the importance of open, evidence-based communication and decision-making for building trust and fostering civil debate: "Say what you mean, mean what you say, have data that supports your POV, and be open to actively listen to counterpoints. At any opportunity you are allowed to change your mind, based on data — let it be so."

Law enforcement can also aid in providing additional security at contentious meetings. In some communities with a longer history of conflict, law enforcement had already become a

fixture at meetings. In other cases, local law enforcement helped to put in place various security measures for community meetings, including upgrading lock systems, installing bulletproof daises (i.e. the raised platforms that officials sit on), or developing and sharing evacuation plans in case of emergencies *(more on security responses in Section V below)*. Officials did note that the presence of law enforcement was sometimes not by request but rather a built-in feature of civic governance: in some cities and counties, the sheriff, as the "head" of a division, would automatically attend every local meeting to provide updates and information for community members. However, some local officials explicitly mentioned that they did not want expanded security measures. One interviewee, for example, stated that the increased security in and around town hall made it more difficult to connect with constituents.

Especially when meetings take a contentious turn, local officials have stressed the importance of employing de-escalation skills, which can be further developed with formal training resources. Some interviewees, especially those with backgrounds in law enforcement, education, social work, or previous governmental experience, had participated in formal de-escalation training. These skills helped lower the temperature of interactions with frustrated constituents and helped local officials feel they had greater control over the situation. One local official described it as "conversational jujitsu," and highlighted how these basic skills can help reduce tensions and facilitate more productive meetings and working relationships. Another flagged these opportunities as one of the top pieces of advice for other officials, while noting that they are not sufficient on their own: "Best thing to do is take a conflict mediation or de-escalation class. If there's anything you need to know as a board member [for your role], if you're doing something, you're trained on it, you learn what you need to know [to do your job]. However, they don't teach you [how to deal with the] increased stresser of conflict and frustration, [you're responsible for] finding ways to learn those skills."

In addition to strategies for engagement at meetings, **officials also reported creating and inviting additional avenues for communication and community outreach outside of meetings, including with those of different political affiliations.** At least three officials reported that they created regular newsletters to keep their constituents informed on local issues, dates of important votes, and meeting agenda items; hosted "coffee hours" at a standard time in their community to be more accessible; and encouraged as many in-person conversations as possible. These strategies serve two purposes. First, they showcase the commitment of local officials to engaging their community and creating additional opportunities for direct connection. Second, they establish open yet "controlled" forums to interact with constituents, rather than debating on social media, for example.

These types of constructive settings and communications channels empowered local officials to engage with constituents on their terms, and often in person, which they frequently described as a lower risk environment for hostile behavior relative to the

internet.[2] "How do I do outreach? I show up to events," one local official said, discussing how they also kept a blog that garnered a positive response in the community, which helped them realize that "the actual community and the community you see on social media are not the same thing." Another official echoed this point: "Don't let social media rise to the level that it is your end all be all on what the community is thinking." They described going to the grocery store and church and having people "tap on [the] shoulder" and express their appreciation for "representing what we want" in government. "It gets you through the yucky stuff," they continued, "99% of the time, it's the best time [doing this job]." These comments underscore the prevailing sentiment that finding constructive ways to connect directly with constituents can create some of the most rewarding opportunities for civic engagement, and allow for a better assessment of real-world hostility levels outside of online spaces.

Research suggests that the vast majority of Americans do not support threats or political violence. These types of outreach strategies can enable officials to build and connect with local support systems, helping them process and counter hostility from the minority who do engage in such activities, especially online.

V. Legal and Security Options

Engaging in public dialogue, building relationships with officials across the aisle, and engaging in healthy disagreement were all underlined as crucial parts of the job by nearly all officials interviewed. While many officials reported regularly navigating high-tension situations, they flagged the necessity of knowing how and when to identify and elevate particularly concerning hostility or credible threats.

Law enforcement can offer trainings, security planning, or other physical security upgrades. Officials who have experienced threats and harassment — or had peers that had experienced such hostility — reported completing, or having requested, active shooter training. In more extreme cases, law enforcement fielded questions from officials about obtaining concealed carry permits. For example, one local official described their decision to get a concealed carry permit as a response to threats and as part of the "mental readiness" necessary to "be ready to be accosted by [constituents who are] angry and potentially carrying a weapon." As with public meetings, officials reported working with law enforcement to put in place stronger physical safety that included consultations for home security like drive-bys. After a series of demonstrations outside of one local official's home,

[2] Findings from the BDI survey with CivicPulse, however, indicate that local officials who have already experienced hostile events report a decreased willingness to participate in political processes and attend public events. After controlling for political party, gender, and age, experiences of hostility while working as an elected official are linked to a statistically significant decrease in willingness to: run for a higher office, work on controversial topics, attend events in public spaces, go out in public when not working, and post on social media. Threats and harassment can therefore create obstacles for this type of engagement, which can in turn amplify the negative impacts of hostility by preventing opportunities for positive direct outreach with the wider community.

law enforcement worked with the elected official to develop a safety plan for them, their spouse, and their children in case of escalation. Although small grants for security are available for places of worship, election officials, and other local offices, interviewees did not mention these funding opportunities, suggesting that many local officials remain disconnected from or unaware of these resources.

Many officials described the need for more guidance about what is a "credible threat" that crosses a line versus the "noise of local politics" — in other words, *when* to elevate incidents of hostility to law enforcement or consider other legal options. For example, one official described how they tried to distinguish between verbal or online harassment and potential physical threats: they assessed "keyboard cowboys" who are not "willing to be recognized for what they are doing" differently than those "willing to escalate if sufficiently motivated." They stressed that threat assessments must also be based on each official's specific context: "You have to judge who you are and where you're at in your life and what the potential threats are to you and your family and the threats are to them. For me that's the most important thing." Many officials raised questions about when a threat is "actionable" by law enforcement; what is legally pursuable as libel or slander; what protections local officials have as public figures; and what constitutes protected speech.

Constructive relationships with law enforcement were reported as particularly useful for tracking and evaluating potential threats. One local official who received sustained harassment throughout their term in office cited working "very diligently to build a good relationship with police" in order to manage which threats to monitor and which to escalate. That collaboration over time helped distinguish the "credible threats" from the "noise." National organizations have a role to play in this threat assessment as well. One local official, who received emails they described as "cursing, violent, and vulgar," looped their colleagues in about the harassment — while remaining in line with Sunshine Laws — and escalated their case to state and national law enforcement with support from the Anti-Defamation League. The local official was able to use statutes around telecommunications harassment to send a cease and desist. In the absence of clear, overarching guidance, these types of relationships filled the gap and created effective frameworks for response.

Officials who have served multiple terms in office noted how, over time, they were able to more clearly identify credible threats that required elevation. Those who are newer to their roles and lack access to institutional history or "on the job training" may require more support. One local official in their second term of office described this evolution over time, reemphasizing the importance of legal and security consultations as well as a focus on identifying the types of responses that are within one's control: "When [threats] first came, out of the blue, I wasn't expecting it. For a year and a half, I had nothing before that, I was so shocked by it. [My first instinct was] they don't have their facts right…let's try to correct the narrative…I tried to reach out to people in their community…it totally backfired. [After consultation with an attorney, city administrator, and chief of police to develop a safety

strategy] I took back some control…it started with shock and [it is now] 'what can I control in this situation and what can't I control?'"

Conclusion and Recommendations

Overall, local officials articulated a deep commitment to serve their communities and resolve conflict constructively, even in the face of threats and harassment. Their responses focused primarily on steps within their direct control, to manage the symptoms of the current climate of hostility and mitigate risk in the short term. These insights offer lessons and guidance for other officials navigating hostile situations, and can inform further study into curative interventions to protect local democracy and civic space over the long term.

While the responses reviewed above pertain chiefly to strategies that can be employed by local officials themselves, the findings also reveal multiple areas where government, civil society, community leaders, and other stakeholders can better support local officials — and officials can better support each other — to address hostility now and into the future. These areas, and related recommendations, are outlined below.

1. **Provide greater assistance to candidates and new officials to build trusted support systems that center their reasons for serving in office.** Long a tool of activist circles and amongst underrepresented groups, this approach — sometimes referred to as "pod mapping" — can be a helpful resource for local officials. If implemented early enough, these efforts can be preventative, whereas they can become increasingly challenging to undertake when officials are already under attack or navigating a crisis. Local officials should customize their approach according to their individual context and support networks.

2. **Provide greater investment in regional peer-to-peer networks.** Regular opportunities for officials to come together across similar local government functions are critical for sharing best practices and building reliable connections — including among members of other parties — that can be tapped for support during times of crisis. These regional partnerships help overcome side effect challenges of compliance with Sunshine Laws and ensure those new to office do not feel isolated, particularly as officials navigate a more contentious climate.

3. **Establish new or specific training programs for city attorneys, town managers, and law enforcement personnel on approaches to mitigating threats and harassment.** Training should focus on these actors as essential points of support to local elected officials and potential targets themselves, providing guidance for enhanced cross-coordination. Each of these individuals can help support local officials before threats escalate by helping them understand their legal rights, develop safety plans, and manage community interactions.

4. **Ensure training on local governance procedures continues to be widely and freely available, augmented by modules on managing contentious topics and situations.** These kinds of training are available through national organizations that recruit local officials, prepare them for office, and navigate their roles — and are essential both for "good governance" and as a conflict reduction tool.

5. **Develop clear, easily accessible guidance on the types of hostility that warrant legal or law enforcement action across different contexts and jurisdictions, as well as alternative strategies for cases that are "just below the line."** This is one of the largest gaps identified by local officials, especially those in more rural areas. Organizations like BDI, the Brennan Center for Justice, and the National League of Cities have developed guides and training to support elected officials dealing with a wide range of hostility, but similar resources are needed to help officials determine when hostility crosses into unlawful behavior and legal tools are appropriate. Whether this is state-by-state guidance on anti-stalking and anti-hate speech provisions, or the introduction of new statutes, officials at the local level are eager for clarity and specific guidelines on how to deal with severe forms of hostility. In many contexts, however, legal or law enforcement solutions may not be sufficient or viable response strategies on their own, even for severe cases of hostility. Civil society and the broader risk mitigation ecosystem should work with officials to develop alternative approaches to fill these gaps.

6. **Ensure resources — especially for therapy, physical security, de-escalation training, and out-of-state network opportunities — are reaching officials less traditionally connected to these tools.** Local officials often feel forced to handle threats and harassment alone. Interviewees described the negative mental health impacts of their service and their efforts to find comfort through friends, religion, and therapy. Especially for those serving in more isolated, less resourced, or rural communities, it can be financially cumbersome to pursue services like therapy, to improve physical security, or to attend expensive out-of-state conferences. While physical security may present clear "solutions" and some officials described accessing mental health support, others are looking to additional agencies and external networks for more ways to support their mental health, especially in rural or lower service areas. States should also consider partnering with organizations like the National League of Cities to expand training on digital security, de-escalation, and bystander intervention, and bring their resources directly to officials. This is especially important for local officials disconnected from large, national party structures.

7. **Collaborate on whole-of-society solutions to push back on the climate of hostility and the normalization of threats over the long term.** Beyond immediate steps to

respond to the heightened threat environment, interviewed officials stressed the importance of more proactive interventions to address core drivers of the increase in hostility more broadly. They spoke of hopes for a future where the political climate does not hinder their ability to do their job, and for a stronger understanding of opportunities to reduce risk in the medium and long term. They often spoke negatively of how national polarization filters down to the local level and wished national leadership would come together to do the bipartisan governance work they see themselves doing at a local level, and to speak out clearly against the normalization of hostile or violent rhetoric. Social media was almost universally maligned by local officials as contributing to a "cesspool" of negative discourse and dis/misinformation, and local officials wished for ways to make digital communication with constituents "more productive" and "more civic." Some civil society groups and officials are also experimenting with innovative initiatives to reduce polarization and other root causes of hostility through non-traditional collaborations in sectors like art and entertainment. In addition to supporting the risk mitigation approaches outlined here, it is imperative that a wide range of stakeholders across sectors and disciplines come together to put forward systems-wide solutions to the larger problem of hostility in both local and national civic spaces so that we can begin to move out of this climate.

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For more about the UTH project and how to cite the research, check our FAQ sheet.



The Bridging Divides Initiative (BDI) is a non-partisan research initiative based at Princeton University that tracks and mitigates political violence in the United States.

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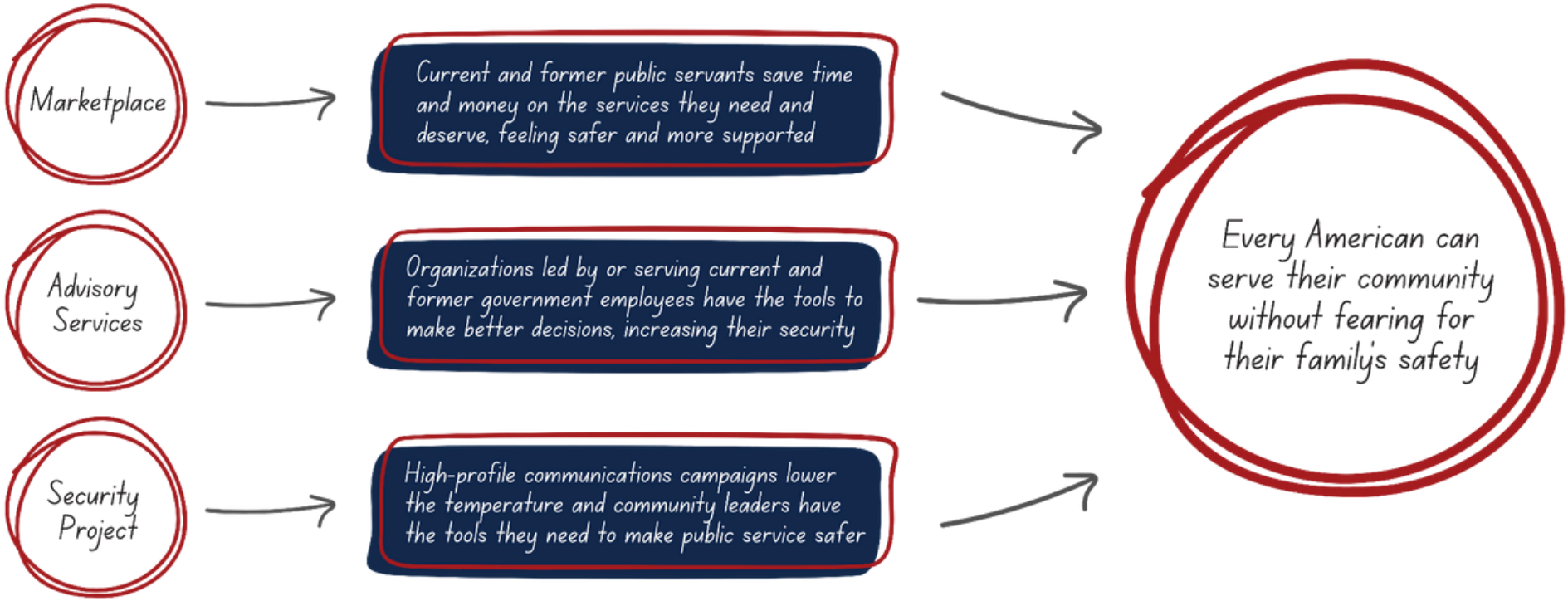
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Spotlight: The Security Map

PSA and The Impact Project – which are housed in the same social enterprise – built **The Security Map**, which was featured on CBS News and is one of the most comprehensive datasets on threats to America's public servants to date.
We will release an updated, follow-on map in the coming months.



Key Findings:

- Violent threats to public servants have skyrocketed over the last decade
- Threatening statements occur at 9x the rate of physical threats
- Roughly a quarter of threats are concentrated in battleground states
- Local public servants account for one-third of threats analyzed