



U.S. Election Assistance Commission – National Clearinghouse (2025)

No Time to Freeze: Empowering Poll Workers with Clear, Accessible Evacuation Guides



Overview

Effective emergency response requires quick, decisive action, but unfortunately, humans' first instinct is generally to freeze instead. This may be especially true for poll workers who work only one or two days a year and have limited opportunities to prepare. Although we trained our poll workers on emergency procedures before election day, we recognized that they have limited capacity to retain complex guidance for unlikely situations.

To address this, we created "evacuation guides" for every poll worker on election day. These one-page handouts provided clear instructions for each poll worker to follow in the event of a precinct evacuation. Notably, the guides were tailored to each station in the polling place (greeter, check-in, ballot table, etc.), allowing us to distill the instructions to only the pertinent steps for each role that involved only the materials directly in front of them.

The guides were printed on the back side of the station-specific handouts that poll workers were already using throughout the day. This ensured that poll workers had immediate access to the essential information they need to evacuate quickly – enabling them to effectively respond to an emergency despite their likely first instinct to freeze.

Creativity and Innovation

The critical moment in an emergency response is when the emergency first occurs, so we worked to make our evacuation guides as immediately helpful as possible.

Our innovation lies not in the information itself (our evacuation procedures had been in place for years) but rather the placement of this information in our materials. Previously, all emergency guidance was kept in the back of the poll worker manual. While this allowed poll workers to read this information ahead of election day, it was difficult to access when needed most. We decided to place the evacuation instructions on the back of handouts that poll workers were already using, making the directions immediately accessible.

Moreover, the instructions were tailored to each station in the precinct. Our old instructions listed directions for all poll workers on one page, requiring poll workers to read through an entire page to discern their role. By breaking up instructions into their most essential pieces ("Check-in officer: take one pollbook"), we eliminated confusion over roles and responsibilities. This clear, direct approach, combined with the strategic placement of the information, saves valuable response time in an emergency situation.



Cost Effectiveness

The evacuation guides are printed on the back of existing handouts, so the printing costs are minimal. The materials are also designed to be evergreen and not unique to any one election, so they do not need to be remade.

Can be Replicated by Other Offices

Our evacuation guides can easily serve as a template for other jurisdictions. Election officials can replace the text in our guides with directions unique to their own process. Most jurisdictions already have evacuation procedures in place, so they would just need to change the placement of this information for their poll workers.

Meets Category Requirements

In preparing for the November 2024 election, our office was acutely aware of emergency situations that could force polling places to be evacuated—such as bomb threats, fire alarms, and other hazardous scenarios. In these moments, poll workers lead the response and have only a few moments to evacuate everyone and take critical materials to continue operations.

Since poll workers serve only on election day and lack extensive training, our office must provide them with clear materials and instructions requiring minimal preparation. By doing so, we increase the likelihood that our prescribed procedures will be followed in an emergency.

Additionally, the evacuation guides help distribute responsibilities more effectively among the team of poll workers, ensuring a more effective emergency response. Previously, the Chief poll worker was responsible for executing the emergency response and delegating tasks. While the Chief is generally the most qualified to handle typical precinct functions, they might not be the best equipped to take charge in an emergency. The evacuation guides eliminate any ambiguity regarding roles in an emergency situation, empowering any poll worker to take charge when others may freeze.



Improves Outcomes for Voters and Election Officials

Evacuation guides help ensure continuity of operations during emergencies. By giving poll workers clear guidance on how to move critical materials, voters can continue casting ballots even if a polling place becomes unusable. The guides also standardize procedures, promoting a consistent emergency response across precincts.

The guides also increased poll workers' confidence in handling emergencies. In a post-election survey, 94.9% reported feeling "very well prepared" or "moderately prepared." One poll worker commented: "Please keep the emergency procedures page on the back of the yellow 'during the day' guides! That was a great idea and could be useful even in less contentious circumstances (e.g., a fire or medical emergency). Our chief usually keeps the page with the precinct address on the chief's table, but it was great to know the information was available elsewhere—the chief's table may not be accessible."

These procedures were recently used during a December 2025 special election, when a suspected gas leak forced a temporary evacuation. While the fire department assessed the situation, poll workers used the evacuation guides to calmly relocate equipment and materials, and voting was able to continue without disruption.