Hate Speech and Civility: What's a City To Do

Session Handouts

Sample Response Against City Manager or Staff

Council Statement

The Council received and reviewed your complaint. The Council has reviewed the underlying facts and consulted with legal counsel about this matter as well. Based on our review, we have determined that the allegations made in your complaint are unsupported, and no violations of City policy occurred. The Council will be taking no further action related to this matter.

If the same complaints against [City Manager] are repeated:

The Council has reviewed your concerns, determined they are unsupported, and the Council will not be taking any further action related to those concerns.

If complaints about staff are repeated:

While you are permitted to continue to give public testimony on whatever topics you want, please know that the Council is fully satisfied with how the matters you continually testify about have been handled and we won't be taking any further action.

Sample Response to Disrespectful Public Comment

If the person uses hate speech, racial or ethnic slurs, or creates a hostile work environment for staff….

Mayor - "I'm going to have to interrupt you."

City Recorder pauses timer

Mayor - "Public comment during city council meetings is not an absolute right. Rather, we have permitted public comment for the limited purposes of bringing issues to the attention of council related to the business of the city within the council's jurisdiction."

"We have granted this permission on the condition that public comment is provided in a manner that is respectful to those in attendance and refrains from using hate speech, racial or ethnic slurs, or otherwise creates a hostile work environment for our employees in attendance."

"I am warning you to refrain from using such language, and if you fail to do so, I will deem you outside the scope of permitted comments and direct the city recorder to mute you from being able to make further comments."

"You may continue with the remainder of your time."

City Recorder resumes timer

If the person <u>continues</u> to use hate speech, racial or ethnic slurs, or creates a hostile work environment for staff….

Que City Recorder to mute microphone

Mayor - "Your comments continue to fall outside the scope of permitted comments. We will now move onto the next speaker." (end public comment if no other speakers)

Sample Public Comment Script

"Persons wishing to speak will be recognized at this time."

"If you are here in person and wish to speak, please fill out a yellow card and hand it to the City Recorder. When I call on you, please join us here at the table and speak into the microphone so those on Zoom can also hear your comments."

"We have # persons registered to speak virtually, and the deadline to register has now passed."

"Your microphone will be unmuted when I call your name. Virtual comments will follow in person comments."

"Comments are limited to three minutes. This is an opportunity for members of the public to inform the Council about their views. Note the Council will not be entering into a dialogue during this time, however the City Manager may direct staff to follow up with you regarding your comment or questions."

"We will begin by hearing from ….."

In Person: See yellow cards
Virtual:

L ocal leaders play key roles in supporting American democracy. As their roles are public facing, local elected officials and municipal employees act as residents' primary connection to their government. This public responsibility can lead to heightened interest in their work, creating opportunities for both support and disagreement. While individuals have free speech rights, when criticism turns to harassment and threats of violence, it can cause physical and psychological harm to public servants and their families, ultimately preventing good leaders from seeking public office.

Threats to local elected officials have implications beyond personal safety. Research from the UC Davis Violence Prevention Research Program found that more than two-thirds (67.2%) of survey respondents "perceived that there is a serious threat to US democracy." Rising political violence may be part of that perceived threat. According to the Mayors Innovation Project, threats against local officials are also threats "to democracy, [by] threatening to deter individuals from campaigning, serving in office, and seeking subsequent terms... [they are] threatening to deter progress in increasing representation across race, gender, and sexual orientation in elected office."

What the data shows

Threats over the last two years have grown significantly, with 240 reported events across 40+ states in 2024. This increase is 15 percent above 2023 rates and 60 percent higher than the same period in 2022.

Eighty-one percent of elected officials responding to a 2021 NLC survey reported experiencing harassment, threats and violence, and 87 percent reported noticing a change in the levels of harassment, threats and violence during their time in office. Additionally, racially motivated threats and harassment are reported at higher rates than other types of threats and harassment.

The causes of political violence

In 2023, CNN analyzed 10 years' worth of federal criminal cases on violence towards public officials and found that many threats appear to be politically motivated. NLC's 2021 *On the Frontlines of Today's Cities* report detailed three root causes for the decline in civility and growth of harassment, threats and violence against public officials, including:

◆ Polarization

- ◆ Pushback against inclusive political participation
- ◆ Spread of mis- and disinformation online (social media, information sources, growth of harmful platforms, and limited regulation of inaccurate information)

Research from the US Surgeon General has warned about an epidemic of loneliness that impacts social and democratic health in addition to personal and physical health. Social isolation has also been identified as a risk factor for political radicalization and violence in youth. Robert Putnam, a scholar on social connection, has connected the rise in social isolation with growing political polarization. Social connectedness across communities leads to higher levels of trust in others, and in the government.

> **According to Putnam, the act of democracy goes beyond voting—it involves engaging with members of your community—through social groups, in shared public spaces, and more.**

Considerations for turning down the temperature

Building Social Infrastructure

Leaders at the local level can play an important role in building social capital to combat the complex problem of rising loneliness. Strengthening social infrastructure in local communities is one strategy to advance social connection, as identified by the Surgeon General's report. Social infrastructure includes the physical elements of a community, like libraries, parks, green spaces and playgrounds, that facilitate social connection. Communities can invest in these shared public spaces, helping to bring people together.

Improving Civil Discourse

Local elected officials can take steps to improve civil discourse in their communities. As community leaders, they play a role in modeling civil discourse that is respectful and avoids offensive or violent rhetoric. City governments can also be mediators in the community by working strategically with community groups to facilitate difficult conversations. Municipalities can develop a code of conduct outlining what is deemed to be permissible and appropriate behavior by officials and constituents during public city meetings and events, emphasizing specific rules and norms for everyone.
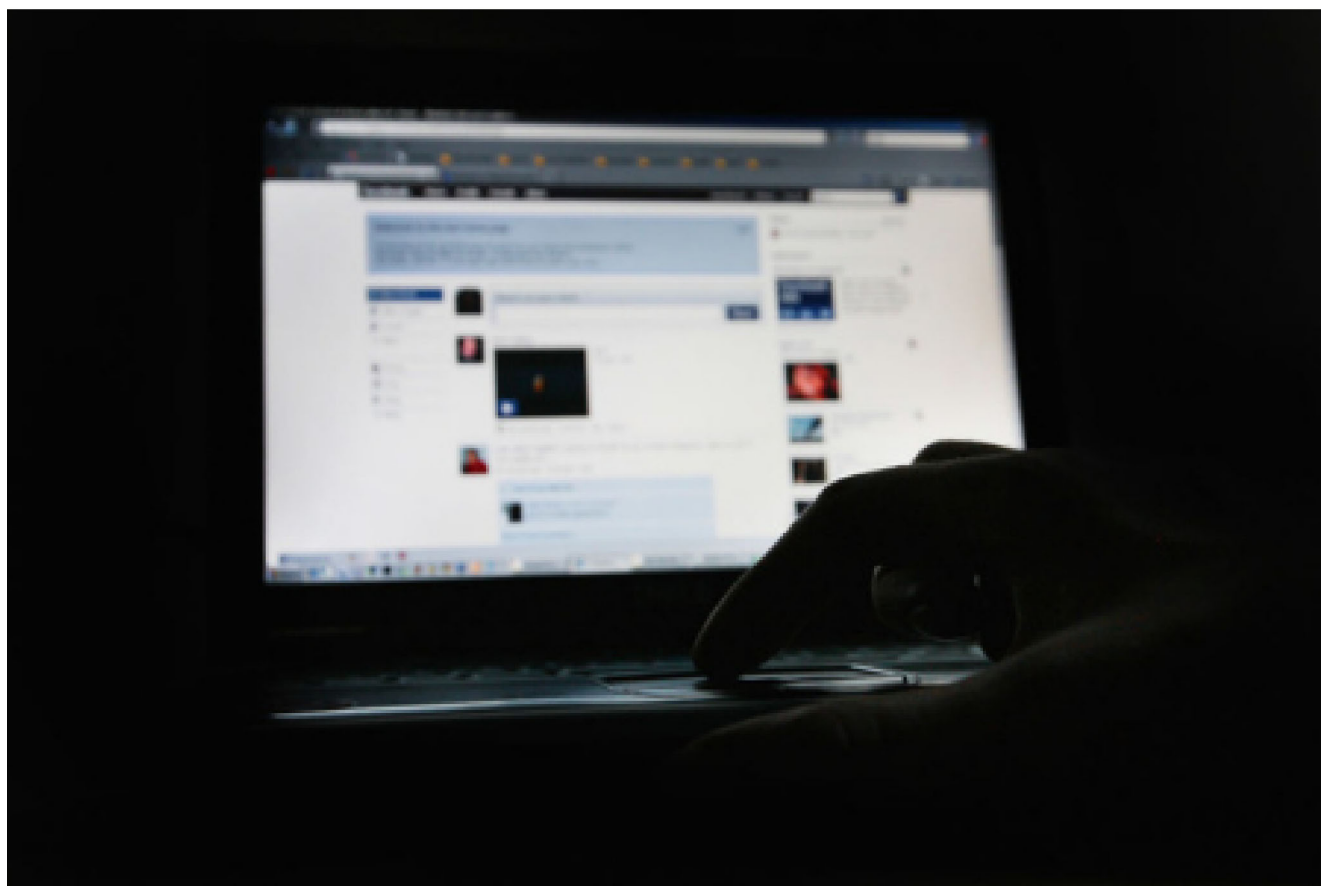
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