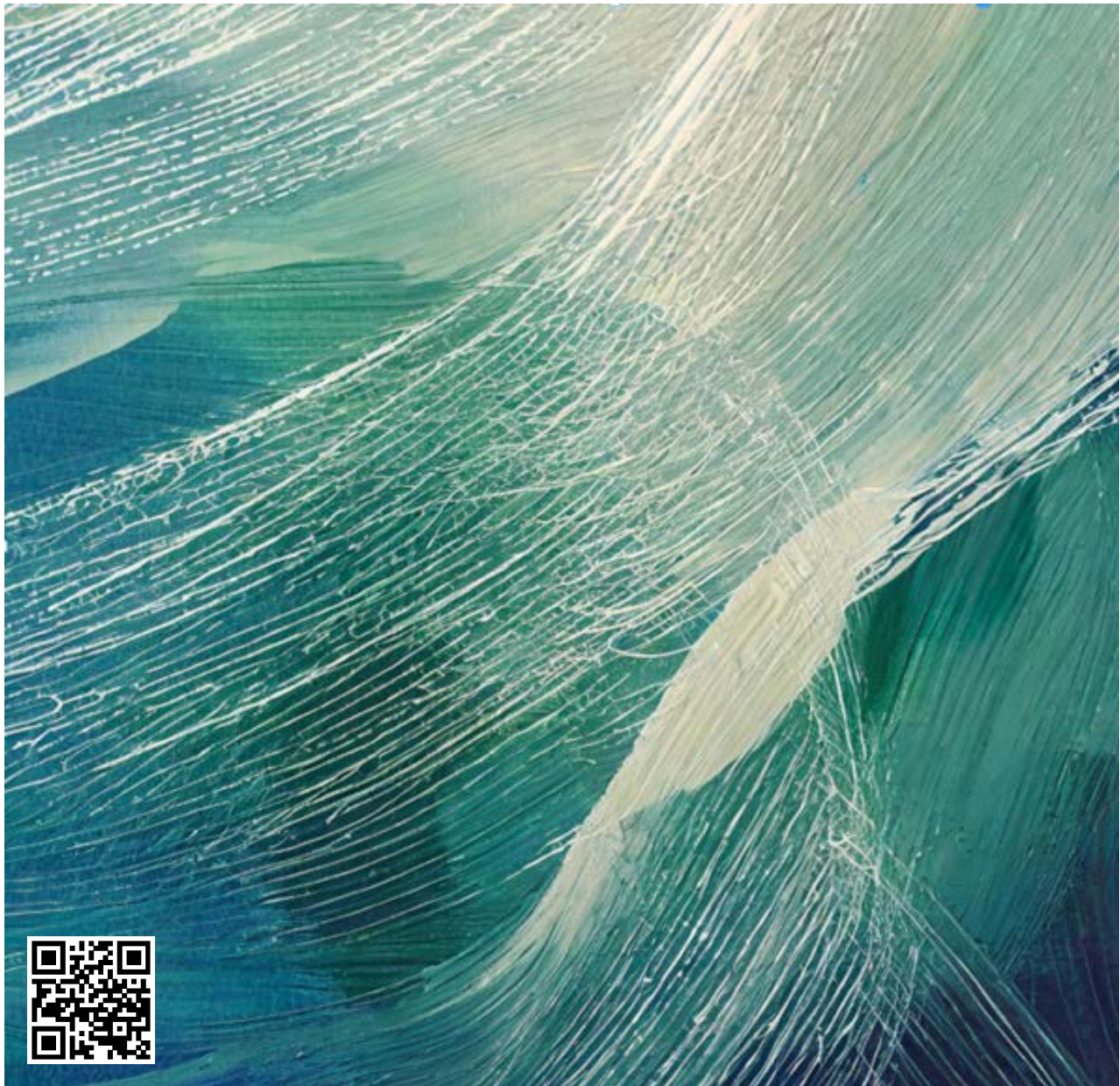


LEADING A COMMUNITY DURING TIMES OF CONFLICT

Practical Strategies to Build Resilience, Plan Ahead, and
Respond to Crises



Divided Community Project

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<https://go.osu.edu/dcp>



THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY

MORITZ COLLEGE OF LAW



INTRODUCTION & CRISIS CHECKLIST | PRACTICAL STRATEGIES TO BUILD RESILIENCE, PLAN AHEAD, AND RESPOND TO CRISES

Despite growing polarization across the country,¹ Americans continue to trust their local leaders.²

Local leaders – beginning with public officials but importantly including individuals from business and service organizations, bar associations, civil rights groups, religious institutions, youth organizations, and the like – can take advantage of that trust to help residents enhance relationships across differences and promote collaboration in the face of division. That community resiliency can significantly help reduce the likelihood of violence when conflicts divide the community. And, when conflict threatens to diminish residents’ trust of each other and with leadership, leaders’ choices can help preserve it.

Preparation ahead of conflict matters. Communities that invest in building resilience are better equipped to navigate conflict. Residents tend to treat each other with greater respect. In today’s environment, conflicts can escalate in minutes, not days. Community members urgently seeking information often trust the first source they encounter, making timely and credible communication essential. Leaders who have prepared contingent responses to crises are better equipped to help avert tragedy and support understanding across differences.

This guide offers practical strategies to help local leaders strengthen community resilience and prepare for moments when conflict may escalate into crisis. It affirms the value of leaders modeling a constructive tone that does not eliminate differing viewpoints but welcomes them and fosters an atmosphere where their expression can occur safely and respectfully. Similarly, the guide’s suggested planning practices support leaders listening broadly and efficiently to the expression of community concerns – not dilute those voices – and then respond concretely and visibly; this approach often reduces the likelihood that residents will escalate their actions in ways that could harm the community, endanger lives, or leave lasting bitterness.

Chapters 1 through 6 offer ideas to strengthen the community’s trust and responsiveness. Chapters 7 through 9 help both to prepare in advance for moments when conflict may escalate into crisis and to respond after they arise (a checklist immediately below facilitates your using this guide in the midst of a divisive event). The final chapter urges that leaders use their time constructively, after a conflict, to capture lessons from their response to community unrest and to plan proactively and collaboratively for future events. Each chapter of this guide outlines potential strategies and includes real world illustrations, tools leaders can use constructively during times of crisis and calm. A comprehensive checklist at the end provides a quick reference to key ideas.

A Crisis Checklist for Imminent Mass Crowd Events and the Aftermath of a Hate Incident

To use the guide as a mass crowd event looms or in the aftermath of a hate incident:

- **Plan jointly**, including the mayor's staff and representatives of all law enforcement agencies that might be involved in a worst-case scenario, to 1) reach consensus on approaches and responsibilities and 2) establish a joint Emergency Operations Center for mass crowd events.
 - **Ask a staff member** to create the planning meeting agenda for mass crowd events (reviewing Chapter 8) or for hate incidents (reviewing Chapter 9).
- **Communicate** with the public promptly and often, paying attention not only to accuracy and authenticity of content, but also to the messengers and methods of conveying the message to reach and gain the trust of key audiences.
 - **Ask communications staff** to review the Sample Communications Checklist in Chapter 7B.
- **Reach out to those most directly affected** to listen to their concerns, keep them personally informed of plans to keep them safe, and respond to their needs. In your public communications, let the community know that these persons are being helped.
 - **Ask community outreach staff** to review Chapter 7A.
- **Help those indirectly affected** to respond to their needs and find safe ways that they can convey their viewpoints or mourn together.
 - **Ask community outreach staff** to listen to the concerns of those indirectly affected and to review Chapter 7 for ideas that fit your situation and offer ways to help or offer options for these residents. Request that they keep you informed so that your communications can reflect what staff learn or plan.
- **Consider whether to engage or seek advice from a mediator** to see whether there are options for resolving the issues.
 - **Ask leadership staff** to review the discussions in Chapter 6 about using mediators.
- **Set a tone** that will permeate communications and law enforcement actions and will encourage expressions of viewpoints that remind residents of the values and aspirations that bind your community together.
- **Ask staff** to consider how they can convey that tone throughout their responses to the events or
- **Seek advice** from leaders who have experience with similar events.³



Notes

1. Jeffrey Jones, Americans Agree Nation Is Divided on Key Values: Percentage Perceiving Nation Is Divided Ticks Up to New High, GALLUP (2024), <https://news.gallup.com/poll/650828/americans-agree-nation-divided-key-values.aspx>.
2. Megan Brenan, Americans' Trust in Media Remains at Trend Low, Trust in Political and Civic Institutions Highest for Local and State Governments, Lowest for Media and Congress, Gallup (2024) (trust levels for government handling problems at their levels are 68% local, 55% state, 37% federal), <https://news.gallup.com/poll/651977/americans-trust-media-remains-trend-low.aspx>.
3. Resources are listed at the end of the guide. You can also contact Bill Froehlich, Director of the Divided Community Project at Froehlich.28@osu.edu. The Divided Community Project may have experienced community mediators available, without a charge, for consultation with local leaders.



11. CUMULATIVE CHECKLIST

A simplified checklist, based on the individual checklists within each chapter, may be helpful for those overseeing the planning. Each number corresponds to a chapter of this guide.

[1. Organize a Planning Process](#)

- Adopt principles to shape the organizing effort.
- Set overall goals.
- Develop a planning checklist.
- Attempt to frame the effort.
- Assess what might occur if no planning takes place.
- Evaluate the community's ability to strengthen its resiliency.
- Determine whether community leaders from multiple sectors have adequate communication channels.
- Make initial determinations regarding categories of planning participants.

[2. Engage Planning Committee Participants](#)

- Select initial participants.
- Select the chair.
- Persuade each selected individual to participate.
- Provide a method for adding members as new needs arise.

[3. Articulate Community Identities and Values](#)

- Develop a process for listening to concerns; and considering and getting further input on potential solutions.
- Frame what is heard and what is under consideration so that residents can offer meaningful suggestions.
- Articulate the community's distinctive identity, values, and aspirations for feedback from the community.

[4. Strengthen Infrastructure to Listen and Respond](#)

- Develop broad and broadly representative advisory groups.
- Create and publicize ways by which individual citizens can contact and alert community leaders of issues.
- Use social media.
- Use surveys, deliberative polling, or other information-gathering methods.
- Monitor warning signs.

- Utilize scanning systems from noted organizations.
- Staff the infrastructure for listening and dealing with concerns.

5. Offer Forums to Identify and Address Community Concerns

- Regularly convene meetings of advisory groups with key public officials.
- Provide deliberative forums in which people can raise concerns with public officials and explore possible actions to be taken.
- Conduct a citizen assembly.
- Utilize experienced and diverse mediators, facilitators, or moderators to organize and execute public conversation forums.
- Announce any decisions related to concerns raised.
- Offer meaningful ways for those engaged to pursue their interests.

6. Establish and Expand Constructive Patterns of Interacting About Problems

- Work to ensure that public officials are included in positive community engagement activities with community leaders.
- Support interfaith conversations aimed towards building understanding and communication across divides.
- Engage in activities that can help participants realize that their common values outnumber their differing values.
- Promote community efforts that organize and conduct educational workshops on how to conduct difficult conversations that simultaneously foster peaceful interaction.
- Work with media to develop a plan for all media to convey accurately what is occurring.
- Plan regular meetings of spokespersons from different organizations.
- Educate all leaders who make public statements to refer to the community's shared goals and its customary practices of resolving differences.

7. Communicate About an Incident or Issues of Deep Concern to Community Residents

- Regarding the substance of the communications:
 - What has happened.
 - What has been done to ensure the public's safety.
 - What has been done to support those most directly affected.
 - Explanations of how some people have been affected.
 - What decisions have been made and who is accountable for implementing them.
 - Who will be consulted and what values will be applied in making future decisions.
 - Frames the issues in reference to community values.
 - Affirms freedom of expression while underscoring expectations.
 - Counters exaggerated or untrue narratives.



- What residents might do related to their concerns in a way that has impact and is in a safe environment.
- Regarding potential messenger/s for each message:
 - Who is trusted and influential with each group?
 - Who will convey the importance of the matter?
 - Will these persons join together or speak in a series to convey a positive community-wide attitude?
 - Are there trusted experts who might help explain?
- Regarding the manner for conveying the message:
 - Consider a method other than a press conference-type statement.
 - Consider using various social media and other sources of news used by residents.
 - Identify and use a website.
 - Repeat messages.

8. Plan with Law Enforcement and Community Leaders for Potential Unrest Scenarios

A. How will each of the following actions be conducted and who has responsibility for them?

- Release communications that set a positive tone for any demonstrations and explain what is permitted and prohibited in this context.
- Contact representatives of the groups likely to engage in a protest.
- Augment advisors, mediators, law enforcement/dialogue team, and communications assistance.
- Contact the media with suggestions for safe sites for their work.
- Organize alternative ways for those seeking a safer way to express views.
- Jointly discuss what more can be done to reduce the chances of violence.
- Jointly draft “incident action plans” regarding the criteria and goals for arrests.
- Determine the Emergency Operations Center (EOC) participants.
- Assign responsibilities for:
 - Communications,
 - Watching for known antagonists and others bent on violence or destruction and developing a strategy to respond to them while protecting the safety of those demonstrating peacefully,
 - Assessing the goals and intensity of emotions of each part of the crowd, especially watching for counter protesters and developing plans to separate them,
 - Observing the routes people are taking coming to and, especially, leaving the event to help assure safety,
 - Directing passing motorists and pedestrians to keep them safe and keep demonstrators safe from them, and
 - Providing medical, sanitation, and counseling resources.
- Train EOC participants and practice plans with a tabletop simulation.
- Brief officers who will be working at the demonstration site and municipal department leaders.
- Consider committing to contract for an after-action report.



B. How will the following potential tasks be allocated and accomplished in the Emergency Operations Center?

- Communicate frequently and through a variety of messengers/media.
- Attempt to stay in touch with those leading or influential with parts of the crowd.
- Stay in touch with any community members acting as parade marshals in the crowd.
- Tell nearby residents or pedestrians how to avoid unsafe situations.
- Consider whether law enforcement should be in view of demonstrators and, if in view, presented in non-threatening ways.
- Prepare designated protest or event space to make it safer.
- Separate demonstrators from counter demonstrators.
- Consider the rules of engagement.
- Monitor stress levels of officers and offer replacements and peer support.
- Watch for a need to position firefighting and medical emergency resources at particular locations.
- Provide guarded paths for demonstrators returning to their cars.
- Observe various parts of the crowd and individuals within the crowd to determine if any members threaten the safety of others or are moving to destroy property and advise others.

C. If there is more time, scenario-specific planning ahead can build on the foundation of the organizational planning and decide who will handle each of the following matters in each potential scenario.

[9. Plan for hate incidents](#)

How will each of these matters be conducted and who has responsibility for them?

- Address safety and anxiety immediately and frequently.
- Humanize members of a targeted group, helping other residents care about them and understand their suffering and fear.
- Reinforce community values and aspirations.
- Touch base with influential community influencers who are willing to speak out against threats, harassment, and violence.
- Provide multiple ways to report hate incidents.
- Offer residents ways to help.

Anticipate and plan together for future hate incidents:

- Counter exaggerated or untrue attributions of blame, and targeted misinformation.
- Analyze hate incidents occurring elsewhere, offer support to residents for whom hate incidents elsewhere might elevate anxiety, and prepare ahead for similar occurrences in your community.
- Pre-Bunk: Anticipate that some will level blame against particular groups when something bad happens and warn residents ahead of that occurring.

- Decide who should receive training.

10. Review After Community Conflict

- Prepare a statement that provides clear information about what occurred.
- Support employees.
- Check in with community leaders.
- Schedule a meeting to discuss next steps focused upon the interests underlying issues raised during the unrest.
- Consider arranging for an after-action report.
- Convene planning for the future.

