

Election officials go on offense to prevent disruptions of 2024 vote

The efforts reflect the challenges facing American elections as Trump and his supporters continue to falsely dispute the results from 2020

[Yvonne Wingett Sanchez](#)

PHOENIX — In training poll workers for this year's presidential election, Arizona Secretary of State Adrian Fontes is preparing them for a series of worst-case scenarios, including combat.

His office is coordinating active-shooter drills for election workers and has sent kits to county election offices that include tourniquets to stem bleeding, devices to barricade doors and hammers to break glass windows.

Fontes, a Democrat and Marine Corps veteran, doesn't think he is overreacting.

"We recognize the real and present danger that's presented by the conspiracy theories and the lies," Fontes said. "An ounce of prevention is really all we can afford right now, and so that's what we're going to do."

Around the nation, those who run voting operations — more than a dozen of whom were interviewed by The Washington Post — say they are preparing for the types of disruptions that historically had been more associated with political unrest abroad than American elections.

In a year when Republicans appear [on track to nominate for president Donald Trump](#), who continues to deny the results of the last election and is already casting doubt on the integrity of this one, election officials are going on offense

more than ever to try to keep election workers safe, educate voters on how the voting and counting processes work, debunk misinformation and hold accountable those who try to disrupt the democratic process.

After demonizing mail-in and early voting during the 2020 and 2022 elections, Republican officials are now telling their voters to embrace it heading into 2024. (Video: JM Rieger/The Washington Post)

They are amping up advertising budgets, increasing training for election workers, learning how best to quickly correct false information and bolstering coordination with federal, state and local law enforcement to better respond to threats and harassment.

The scale of the undertaking reflects the magnitude of the challenge. After years of Trump's relentless attacks on the election system, [fewer than a third](#) of Republicans see Biden's 2020 victory as legitimate. Many voters who believe that the vote was rigged cite as evidence a series of claims that have been repeatedly debunked. New conspiracy theories sprout almost daily, some tracing their origins to authentic-looking AI-generated videos. All the while, election workers face harassment and threats.

Officials say they are realistic about how much they can do to counter those trends.

"We are never going to get the true believers or the people

who are running the grift," said Matt Crane, a former elections officer who is now the executive director of the Colorado County Clerks Association, which advocates for local election officials. "Jesus Christ could come and say, 'No, you're wrong.' And these people would tell Jesus, 'You're crazy.'"

A Trump campaign spokesperson responded to this high level of preparation by saying in a statement: "Election integrity is one of the bedrocks of democracy, and there's nobody who is a bigger defender of free and fair elections than President Trump."

Election officials had similar fears in the days leading up to the 2022 midterm elections, after Trump and his supporters had spent two years threatening to flood polls and counting stations with partisan watchers and otherwise suggesting they might not accept the results. In the end, [the election largely went off without a hitch](#) — even a personal call from Trump for protesters to show up in Detroit on Election Day had no effect — offering some hope about the resilience of American democracy.

Still, election officials say they are taking no chances this year, particularly with Trump himself on track to be back on the ballot. They say they are willing to try almost anything to counter the mounting efforts to undermine trust in America's elections.

In Colorado, the executive board of the county clerks association sent a letter to elected officials across the state [begging them to vouch for the integrity](#) of elections and stand against “dishonest actors, grifters, and bullies, who deserve only our disdain and contempt.” The December letter provided talking points for officials to share when asked about the voting process and stated: “Now is the time for courage, not cowardice.”



Poll workers gather for a meeting before counting ballots during the 2020 general election at the TFC Center in Detroit on Nov. 3, 2020. (Salwan Georges/The Washington Post)

In Michigan, local election workers have been trained on how to de-escalate situations, and state officials are setting up a texting program so workers can quickly contact their bosses

and law enforcement if they are in danger — an idea already implemented in Georgia.

“We have to be very mindful of ... not exacerbating a threat beyond what it actually is because we know part of the goal of threatening our election officials is to scare not just them, but our voters,” said Michigan Secretary of State Jocelyn Benson (D). “We’ve been very intentional about creating plans to deter, to de-escalate and to protect, and also then to let everyone know none of this is going to deter us from our jobs.”

In Nevada, Secretary of State Cisco Aguilar (D) is regularly meeting with pastors and neighborhood groups to build trust in the process. The office was prepared for inaccurate information to spread in English and Spanish months before the 2024 cycle was upon it.

When false claims [began taking hold](#) that Trump would not appear on Nevada’s February presidential primary ballot because his team forgot to file paperwork, Aguilar’s office reiterated to voters in both languages that Trump and other GOP candidates had instead chosen to participate in a GOP-sanctioned caucus. The office has also hired three new investigators to probe allegations of voter fraud, threats against election workers and other election-related claims.

Nowhere is the aggressive posture more obvious than in

political battleground states that decided the last presidential election and endured attempts to overturn the results. Many workers who were on the front lines of running the 2020 and 2022 elections left their jobs because of the hostile environment. Those who remain are taking a more proactive approach this year in hopes of a more peaceful process.

This is especially true in Arizona.



An election worker walks past pro-Trump protesters alleging voter fraud at the Maricopa County Tabulation and Election Center in Phoenix on Nov. 6, 2020. (Caitlin O'Hara for The Washington Post)

When Trump and his supporters [tried to reverse Biden's 2020 victory](#), Arizona was one of their top targets. Officials

weathered [death threats](#) and harassment as they defended the election process and the results it yielded. In 2020, Fontes was a top election official in Maricopa, the state's most populous county. There, Trump supporters surrounded one of his colleagues outside a building where ballots were being processed. The colleague had to be yanked from the angry crowd by a sheriff's deputy.

Fontes and others are finding ways to blunt the [harassment some election workers face](#). Those include possibly registering employees' home addresses with law enforcement in case they are targeted by prank calls to emergency services designed to draw a police response, a harassment tactic known as swatting. And as part of an effort to quickly counter disinformation and misinformation, Fontes is teaching officials and the public how to spot fake videos and photos generated by artificial intelligence.

In addition to those statewide efforts, local leaders are making their own plans. In the days around the election, the Phoenix-area sheriff's office will intensify surveillance of the county's ballot tabulation headquarters by horseback, drones and other methods. In Cochise County, a conservative rural area in southern Arizona, officials are planning to train election workers how to recognize exposure to fentanyl, and how to administer the overdose-reversal drug, Narcan, said Sheriff Mark Dannels (R). Late last year,

election offices around the nation received letters containing white powdery substances — some initially thought to be fentanyl.

“We have never done that before,” Dannels said. “It’s a sad state.”

Across Arizona, officials said that protecting the integrity of the election and the safety of poll workers starts with better educating voters and countering false information.



Law enforcement patrol outside the Maricopa County Tabulation and Election Center during the midterm elections on Nov. 8, 2022 in Phoenix (Eric Thayer/for The Washington Post)

In Maricopa, home to Phoenix and most of the state’s voters, county officials have given more than 200 tours of the

ballot-counting facility, taking people step-by-step through the vote-counting process. The county attorney's office added another lawyer to help handle election-related work, including responding to efforts to try to obstruct voting.

The county's GOP-led governing board plans to operate an emergency communications center modeled after systems used to respond during natural disasters so it can quickly and efficiently manage the flow of information, a top official familiar with the plans said. In 2020, county leaders assigned two employees to handle election-related inquiries from the public. This year, seven employees are dedicated to those inquiries, and county leaders are working on plans to assign as many as 26 additional staff to the center.

The county tested an emergency communications center during the 2022 midterm election. Those assigned to the center set expectations for the public about the [length of time it would take to count](#) ballots, as well as debunking volumes of deceptive information in both English and Spanish. This year, the county is testing technology that would embed digital information in online video and photos that would allow the public to distinguish between official government information and [deepfakes](#), a person familiar with the planning said.

Pinal County, a conservative area that borders metro Phoenix, was overwhelmed during the midterm election by

requests for recorded video of [ballot drop boxes](#), the steel boxes that were central to the false storyline that “mules” had illegally stuffed them with fraudulent ballots to help Biden.

This time, Pinal officials are boosting internet capacity to stream live footage of the boxes online in the hopes it discourages [armed citizens](#) from showing up to monitor them.

The county is also preparing to expand the use of GPS devices to track the movements of batches of ballots and voting equipment. The tracking system, first tested during the midterms, was developed in response to false claims that emerged in 2020 about voting security, including one involving a rumor that a school bus filled with voting equipment had been abandoned in a desert town. (The bus was [carrying office equipment](#) and had not been abandoned.)

“We knew that it was just rumor and trying to evoke some kind of emotion — a negative one at that,” said the county recorder, Dana Lewis (R). “But not being able to disprove it was very frustrating.”

Officials are also working to [step up punishments](#) for those who seek to undermine elections.

Arizona Attorney General Kris Mayes (D) obtained felony indictments late last year against two GOP supervisors in [Cochise County](#) who delayed their governing board's acceptance of midterm election results. The supervisors have pleaded not guilty and have cast the case as politically motivated. Mayes is also investigating Republican electors who [falsely portrayed Trump](#) as the state's winner in 2020.

That probe could soon net long-expected indictments, a person familiar with the status of the investigation said. Mayes has retooled a unit once exclusively devoted to probing claims of election fraud — some false — to instead focus on threats against election workers, voting rights and ballot access.

She told The Post that her office "will not tolerate any efforts to undermine our democracy.

Patrick Marley and Emily Guskin contributed to this report.