



# Municipal Reporter

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## RESPONDING TO POLITICAL VIOLENCE EDITION



Staying Cool as the Temperature Rises

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# RESPONDING TO POLITICAL VIOLENCE

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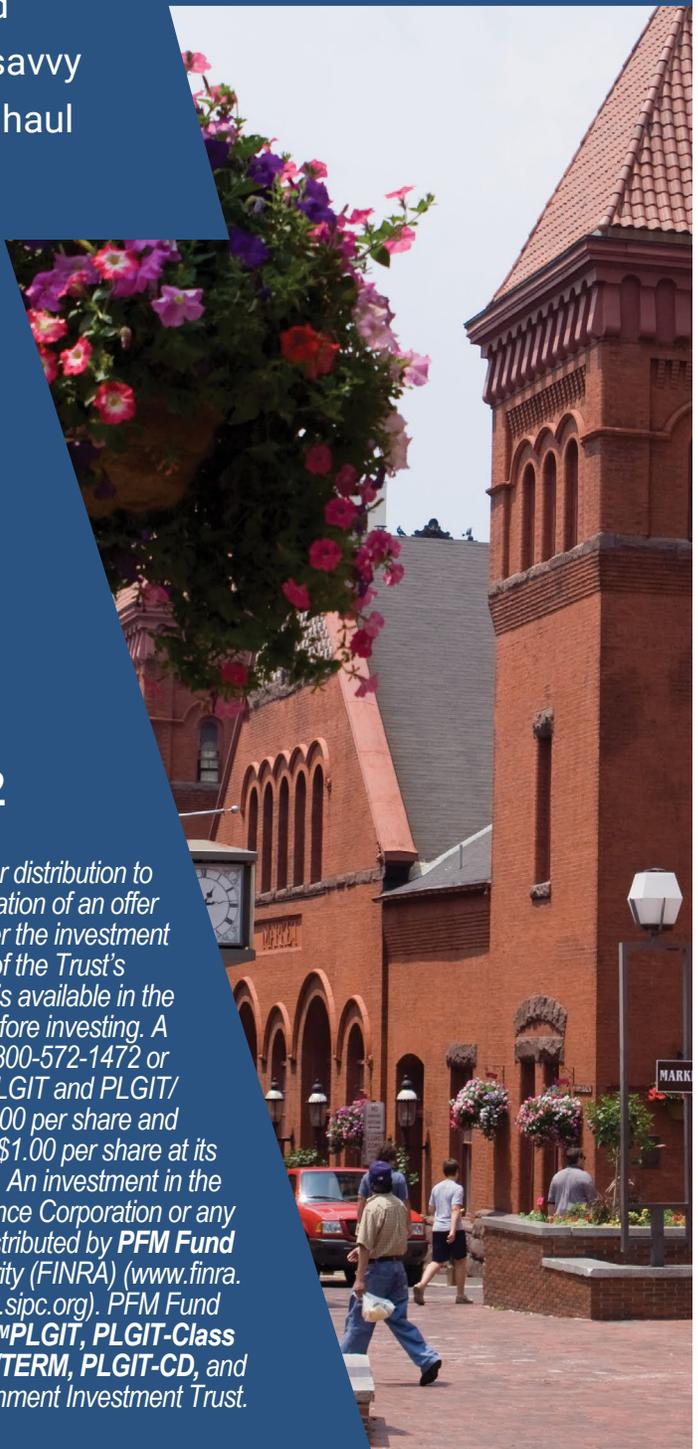
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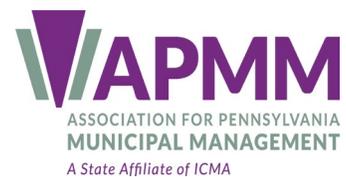
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The Pennsylvania Municipal League strengthens and empowers effective local government through advocacy, education, and support for our members.

The League is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization established in 1900 as an advocate for Pennsylvania's 3rd class cities. Today, The League represents participating Pennsylvania cities, boroughs, townships and home rule communities that all share The League's municipal policy interests. Our Board of Directors oversees the administration of a wide array of municipal services including legislative advocacy (on both the state and federal levels), publications designed to educate and inform, education and training certification programs, membership research and inquiries, programs, and group insurance trusts.

We are continually monitoring the needs of our members and are committed to providing the commonwealth's municipalities with cost-effective programs and services required to meet the distinct needs of their communities.

The *Municipal Reporter* is a publication of the Pennsylvania Municipal League, the Pennsylvania State Association of Township Commissioners and the Association for Pennsylvania Municipal Management. It is published six times a year on a bimonthly basis. Opinions expressed by authors

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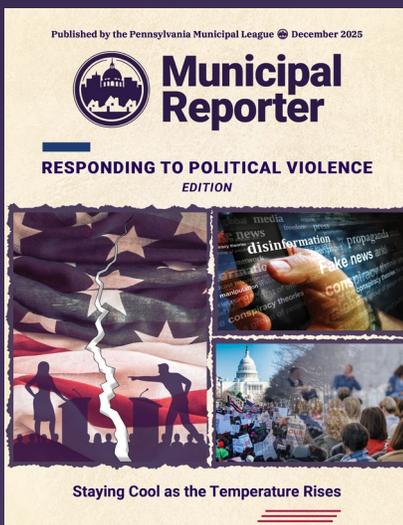
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# Mark Your Calendar



**2026**

*League Learning Academy*  
**Lunch & Learn Series: Audit-Ready  
 from Day One: Financial Prep for a  
 Stress-Free Year**  
**January 15**  
 Virtual

*League Learning Academy*  
**Public Service for Everyone: What  
 Happens When all are Welcome**  
**January 21**  
 Virtual

*League Learning Academy*  
**From Agenda to Action: Running  
 Productive Municipal Meetings**  
**February 3**  
 Virtual

*League Learning Academy*  
**Elected Auditors Masterclass: From  
 Fundamentals to Excellence**  
**February 10-11**  
 Virtual

**APMM Executive Development  
 Conference**  
**February 12-13**  
 Hotel Hershey

*League Learning Academy*  
**Capital Budgeting and Planning**  
**February 18**  
 Virtual

*League Learning Academy*  
**Lunch & Learn Series: Where to Begin  
 Creating Your HR Employee Policy  
 Manual**  
**February 19**  
 Virtual

*League Learning Academy*  
**Introduction to Local Government  
 Accounting**  
**February 24-25**  
 Virtual

**PennPRIME Board of Trustees  
 Subcommittee and Board Meetings**  
**February 26-27**  
 Virtual

**Annual PELRAS Conference**  
**March 25-27**  
 Hershey Lodge and Convention  
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# The League Executive Director's Message

***"Nonviolence means avoiding not only external physical violence but also internal violence of spirit. You not only refuse to shoot a man, but you refuse to hate him."***

***-Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.***

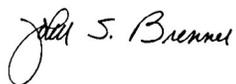
*Our nation's history is littered with violent acts against public officials and far too often violent acts against our fellow citizens, regardless of their station in life. Violence is never the answer, not in our streets, not in our neighborhoods, not in our schools, not in our places of worship, not in our workplaces and not in our society. We strive to be a nation of laws. A modern democracy that should listen to all views, engage in healthy and positive debate, disagree without being disagreeable, make open and transparent public decisions and value facts and research. We have the tools to govern ourselves without descending into chaos, fear and violence to solve our differences.*

*Local leaders are on the front line of the public discourse. We are charged with a higher responsibility to set good examples for public conduct, to help guarantee a safe place for all of us to live, work and grow. It's an awesome responsibility but one local elected and appointed officials must embrace.*

*Butler Township Manager Tom Knights knows this firsthand. As his community faced an onslaught of criticism following the assignation attempt on the President in 2024. We can all learn lessons from his experience, and we can roll up our sleeves to do our part by creating an atmosphere in our municipal buildings, facilities and the larger community where differing voices are heard and respect for one another remains the focal point.*

*This issue of the Municipal Reporter gives us some insight into resources available to you and your community as all of us try to make sense of an atmosphere of senseless acts of political violence. Although we certainly don't have all of the answers, we have something powerful in our favor. We have an overwhelming number of family, friends, neighbors, colleagues and fellow leaders that abhor violence. We have each other.*

Sincerely,



John S. Brenner



JOHN BRENNER



Pennsylvania Municipal  
**League**

## Executive Director's Video Report



# Inside The League



**ABE AMORÓS**  
**DEPUTY EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR -**  
**OPERATIONS – CHIEF DIVERSITY OFFICER**

*With the holiday season in full swing, The League would like to take this opportunity to show its gratitude to all of our members and looks forward to the New Year with renewed hope and optimism. The strength of our organization is directly powered by you, our members. As we approach the New Year, we also recognize how we all look forward to hitting the “reset button” in our professional and personal lines.*

*During the recent City Summit sponsored by the National League of Cities held in Salt Lake City, UT, I listened attentively to the Dignity Index presentation provided by Tami Pyfer Chief of Staff and VP of Project UNITE led by Tim Schriver whose parents founded the Peace Corps and Special Olympics. During that packed session, elected and appointed officials engaged with the presenter along with each other in real-life situations where attendees were able to collaborate on responses to certain situations.*

*The Dignity Index is a powerful tool aimed at preventing violence – verbal, emotional or physical – easing tensions and solving problems. It ranks responses numerically from 1 to 8 with one representing complete rejection of a person’s value and viewpoints all the way to eight which concludes with “we treat everyone with dignity – no matter what.” The Dignity Index, available online at [www.dignity.us](http://www.dignity.us), is also accompanied by a scoring guide that explains how responses differentiate from one number to another. We realize that honoring and recognizing a person’s dignity can be challenging, especially when situations get heated and tough words are used. At its core, the Dignity Index asks all of us to approach disagreements with curiosity, pausing before speaking, listening to understand rather than responding, challenging ideas and not people, acknowledging logical or interesting points and taking the opportunity to build rather than tear down.*

*The League will not only continue amplifying the Dignity Index but will also further engage with Search for Common Ground and Strong Cities Network to share tools with municipal leaders on maintaining civility in our public discourse by taking down the temperature in all of our interactions, whether they be professional or personal. This will require more work in 2026, especially with key elections taking place at the national and state levels which will also impact our overall political environment.*

*Let us all endeavor to listen more attentively to those we disagree with while acknowledging their interest and value in our public spaces. Our constituents and communities will be better off when our leaders emulate best practices in the way of dignity, civility, and respect.*

*From Inside The League,*

*Abe Amorós*

Abe Amorós



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# LEAGUE LEARNING ACADEMY

## Spring 2026 Schedule

### JANUARY

**15** Lunch & Learn - \_Audit-Ready from Day One: Financial Prep for a Stress-Free Year

**FREE Webinar for Everyone**  
**9 a.m. to 10 a.m.**

**21** Webinar: Public Service for Everyone  
What Happens When All Are Welcome

### DETAILS

- Courses are 9:00 a.m. to Noon
- Lunch & Learns are 12:10 to 1:10
- All sessions are online via Zoom
- Click [here](#) for details and registration or scan the QR code below

### FEBRUARY

**3** From Agenda to Action - Running Productive Municipal Meetings

**10 & 11** Elected Auditors Masterclass

**18** Capital Budgeting and Planning

**19** Lunch & Learn - Where to Begin  
Creating Your HR Employee Policy Manual

**24 & 25** Introduction to Local  
Government Accounting

### APRIL

**1** Foundations of Fiscal Management

**7 & 8** HR Municipal Best Practices

**15** Core Municipal Operations

**16** Lunch & Learn - topic TBD

**21 & 22** Public Procurement & Bidding  
Essentials for Municipal Officials

### MARCH

**4** Essentials of Municipal Administration

**18** Unlocking Grant Success - Essential  
Skills for Winning Proposals

**19** Lunch & Learn - topic TBD

### MAY

**5** Advanced Fiscal Management  
Strategies

**12 & 13** Best Practices Municipal  
Performance Management

**14** Lunch & Learn - Topic TBD



## When Democracy Gets Loud: Political Violence in Our Communities

BY SUSAN SCHRACK WOOD, DIRECTOR OF COMMUNICATIONS, THE LEAGUE

Because of its pervasiveness and its far-reaching effects, violence is one of the most devastating national and global challenges we face in our societies. In a recent academic research study on violence, scientists described violence as an all-inclusive destruction of society. They concluded that, “Violence not only causes injury and death, it also erodes the physical, psychological, social, and economic health and development of nearly everyone in affected communities. It can reduce life expectancy, inflict trauma, limit opportunity and achievement, and further existing inequalities.”<sup>1</sup>

While this is true of all violence, politically motivated public violence threatens the very heart of our democracy and our freedoms. The very public assassinations of Democratic Minnesota State Representative Melissa Hortman and her husband in April, and the assassination of conservative political activist Charlie Kirk in October are stark reminders of the dangers facing public figures. But beyond the events that make national headlines, there is the constant, everyday stream of threats and actions against our local public officials. A PEW Research Center poll shows in 2024, nearly half of all states reported threats against election workers, including social media death threats, intimidation, and “doxing.” Doxing is a form of harassment that involves publicly exposing someone’s private information, such as their name, address, job, or other identifying info without their consent. The Department of Homeland Security notes that political violence in the U.S. today is not only about spectacular single events but about a broader environment of threats, intimidation, and targeted attacks that degrade democratic participation. At the same time, researchers and civil-society groups

document surges in harassment and threats aimed at election workers, legislators, and local officials, which have very real effects on how public servant do their jobs, or whether they choose to serve at all.

*“Threats aren’t an abstract statistic; they change who shows up to serve.”*

The most common motivations for violence can be considered inappropriate attempts to handle emotions. It can be a way to express anger, frustration, or sadness. It can be viewed as manipulation for getting what people need or want, and it can be used as a form of retaliation or revenge. A PEW Research Center survey taken this past October shows 85% of Americans surveyed think violence, particularly violence that is politically motivated, is on the rise in our country. This appears to be of equal concern to both Republicans and Democrats who took the survey.

Pennsylvania illustrates how national currents can become intensely local. The state has experienced a mix of high-profile incidents and a steady stream of threats against officials and institutions – from protests that turned heated to criminal attacks against government properties and officials. An assassination attempt on then-presidential candidate Donald Trump in 2024 in Butler Township, and the arson attack on the Pennsylvania Governor’s Residence in 2025 are two high-profile examples. They show how political grievance can morph into violent action targeting elected leaders. Beyond headline events, data-tracking projects and news outlets have identified Pennsylvania among states with elevated counts of threats and targeted incidents against officials.

## The Social Media Blame Game

While both Republicans and Democrats agree that violence is on the rise, there is some disagreement as to what, or rather who, is causing it. Both parties say political extremists, are to blame for fueling anger and dissention; however, they each point fingers in the opposite party's direction. 77% of Republicans say left-wing extremism is a major problem, but only 27% say this about right-wing extremism. The same holds true for Democrats, with 76% saying right-wing extremism is a major problem, and only 32% saying the same for left-wing extremism.

*"We have a larger divide between the right and the left than ever before, so we don't see each other as people but as the 'enemy'. When you see someone as an enemy, you can justify a lot of awful actions"* (PEW Research survey respondent, age 30)

Anyone on social media is well aware of its contributions to violence. Multiple research studies have shown social media significantly contributes to political and public violence. One study found that increased online engagement between opposing political groups is directly associated with increased physical violence during real-world encounters.<sup>2</sup> Another found that social media usage and elite communication strategies correlate with increased civil conflict severity across 157 states. Another revealed an "amplification effect" where social media exposure intensifies existing tendencies toward political aggression.<sup>3</sup>

The blaming and the shaming on social media is rampant with even the most innocent posts able to devolve into a messy shouting match. In an example seen yesterday, one person posted in a community page asking what business was going into a former restaurant site. After a few answers and guesses, one person declared the former restaurant smelled and was glad it closed. This prompted an outraged response declaring the posting person was stupid and must surely be a democrat. 78 outraged comments later the original question had yet to be answered. Although ridiculous, this is a constant occurrence on social media platforms, and while most are relatively harmless by themselves, the cumulative effect can breed violence. The relative anonymity of social media

can bring out the worst in some people, and it only takes a few to fan the flames.

*"No-one know how to discuss and have conversation with people of opposing values. We don't have to agree with each other but we must learn to have adult conversations again."* (PEW Research Survey Respondent, age 60)

Social networks and fringe platforms allow for echo chambers<sup>4</sup>, where people can choose to interact solely with agendas and viewpoints that reinforce their own biases and beliefs, this can accelerate annoyance into anger, amplify calls to action, and make tactics (including violent ones) visible and contagious. Pop culture normalizes violence.

*"My generation and the one below me think they are getting justice by being violent and even killing people who don't agree with them."* (PEW Research Survey Respondent, age 20)

*"Too many people accept this as normal."* (PEW Research Survey Respondent, age 60)

While social media is a contributor to violence, it is certainly not the only factor. Violence is a complex mix of factors, and tackling it requires a combination of community-based prevention, smarter online and offline disruption of violent organizing, and practical protections for the public spaces where democracy happens.

In subsequent articles, we explore the psychology behind public violence, the concept of violence as an addiction, and some plans and strategies that have proven to be effective solutions to reducing and defusing political violence.

## References

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# Governor Shapiro's Address on Political Violence in America

*Delivered September 16, 2025, at the Eradicate Hate Global Summit in Pittsburgh.*

**My family and I feel blessed** to call the Governor's Residence in Harrisburg home. I believe as Governors we have a responsibility to further William Penn's vision from the 1680's of a place that would be warm and welcoming to all, and a place grounded in freedom of religion and expression. A place that, no matter what you look like, where you come from, who you love, or who you pray to, you can call home.

The Residence is a physical embodiment of that commitment to carry the legacy of this great Commonwealth forward. But on the night of April 13<sup>th</sup>, the Residence came under attack, as did my family.

**I woke up to a bang on the door.** It was a state trooper telling us there was a fire and we needed to evacuate immediately. Just hours before, we had gathered for our Seder to celebrate the first night of Passover in the very room the arsonist broke in, launched Molotov cocktails and made his way through the house wielding a metal hammer he later said he was going to use to kill me. Not only was my safety threatened, but my wife, our kids, and members of our extended family were put at risk. I thank God everyday that we were all able to evacuate safely, that no one was physically injured or killed. But that doesn't mean that attack hasn't left emotional scars.

**Violence in all forms is unacceptable, and political violence is particularly dangerous.** Not only does it seek to injure, maim, or kill, it seeks to intimidate,



terrorize, and silence. Political violence doesn't only affect those directly targeted and their loved ones, it affects all of us. It tears at the fabric of American society, and the fundamental principles this nation was founded upon. A nation where civil disagreement should be welcome, because that discourse can lead to progress. Our democracy is stronger when more Americans participate in it, and can make their voices heard. But unfortunately, political violence, and the hate that fuels it, is becoming far too common in our society.

In just the last year or so, we saw it in a field in Butler with the attempted assassination of Donald Trump. We saw it on the streets of New York with the killing

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of the United Healthcare CEO. We saw in the middle of the night in suburban Minnesota when an assassin took the life of Melissa Hortman and her husband, Mark. And we saw it at Utah Valley University with the assassination of Charlie Kirk. Different places, different people, different perspectives, one common thread- people using violence to try to settle political differences.

**Leaders have a responsibility to speak and act with moral clarity**, and as I have made clear each and every time, this type of violence has no place in our society, regardless of what motivates it, who pulls the trigger, who throws the Molotov cocktail, or who wields the weapon. It doesn't matter if it's coming from one side or the other, directed at one party of another, or one person or another. It is all wrong, and it makes us all less safe. We must be clear and unequivocal and call out all forms of political violence as wrong.

**There are some who hear selective condemnation and take it as permission to commit more violence** so long as it suits their narrative or only targets the other side. Sadly, we've even seen some on the internet openly celebrate political violence or issue calls for revenge in the wake of it.

**Giving violence a pass, justifying it, or looking the other way only deepens the divide.** We can't let violence be used as a pretext for more violence. We must reject the rhetoric of vengeance, and instead focus on the work of healing.

After the attack on the Governor's Residence, our family was lifted up by the prayers, blessings, and messages of support we received in the wake of that traumatic event. Those prayers wrapped around us and protected us. Every living former Governor and First Family reached out to express their horror, to check in on us, and to ask what they could do to help. So, the First Lady and I invited all of them to the Residence, to rededicate ourselves to upholding the Commonwealth's foundational values and pledge our shared commitment to the Residence's future as a place of community and resilience. Governors Wolf,

Corbett, Rendell, Schweiker, and Ridge were all there, together with the First Ladies, as were members of the Thornburgh and Casey families. More than half a century of Pennsylvania leadership was represented that day. They are Democrats and Republicans. Leaders of different generations, and from different sides of the Commonwealth. But they were united in speaking and acting with moral clarity, making clear that hatred and violence has no place here. Pennsylvania leaders, from different parties, speaking with one voice to reject the dark cycle of violence and instead, bring light.

After the attack, my family and I wanted to say thank you to the brave firefighters who saved our lives. So, we decided to serve them a meal and invite all the fire companies who responded that night. As we were serving them lunch, an elderly man named John Wardle, the 82-year old Christian chaplain from the Penn Township Volunteer Fire Department, came up to Lori and me and gave us a letter signed by every member of his department. On the back of the letter, he had handwritten a prayer for our family, from Numbers 6:24-26. "The Lord bless you and keep you, the Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace." I wept as I read that and embraced Chaplain Wardle. It's a prayer of comfort, a prayer to make sure we are watched over by God, and a prayer known to us as the priestly blessing. But what you may not know is that It's also a prayer we recited nightly over each of our four children and have since the day they were born. Those are words of healing, of hopefulness. And they are also words that served as a reminder of our common humanity. A recognition that there is far more that binds us together than divides us, no matter what those who stoke that division would have us believe.

**Words are important but aren't enough.** We also need action. We need to make sure people are safe here in Pennsylvania and all across America. Safe to exercise their fundamental rights and freedoms, whether they're debating on a college campus, praying at a synagogue or church, or spending time at home with loved ones.

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**Too many people don't believe that our institutions and the people in them can solve problems.** They feel alone, ignored, and shut out by a government that isn't working for them. This is particularly true of younger Americans. They feel unseen and unheard in our elections, in the media, in our nonprofits and our businesses, and in the law. Frustrated by a lack of progress and consumed by a feeling of hopelessness, they find refuge, often in dark corners of the internet where their righteous frustration is taken advantage of and used to foment hate. It leads to a belief among some that the only way they can address those problems is through violence. They find online those who glorify violence and urge it on. What starts with cowardly keystrokes too often ends with a trigger being pulled. That is dangerous for our democracy, and we need to turn the tide.

**As leaders of this Commonwealth and this country, we've got to listen more, and act faster.** We must get stuff done and restore people's faith in their government. That's what we're doing here in Pennsylvania. Let me give you a few concrete examples: we're processing permits and licenses faster, we're getting you answers quicker, we're making historic investments in education and delivering free

breakfast, more mental health support, and access to vo-tech classes for our students. We're creating economic opportunity on our main streets and in our farmlands. We're building a government that works for Pennsylvanians and gets stuff done. That is the critical work we must do right now, to show it can work. I realize a permit won't end violence, but maybe it causes someone to have a bit more faith that the system can work for them. Think of it, the one time someone turns to government for help and gets it. Maybe it's a part of helping turn this tide, of repairing our institutions and showing that they can still work.

**I believe in America that we truly are stronger than hate.** But I also believe in America this work doesn't fall to others; it starts with each of us. It falls to each and every one of us to do our part. My faith teaches me that on one is required to complete the task, but neither are we free to refrain from it. To me, that means it's on all of us to get off the sidelines, get in the game, and do our part. One of our neighbors, Fred Rogers, once said to "look for the helpers." The ones who show up, who speak up, who stand up to hate. You're showing the rest of us the way. You are the helpers, and you're going to help heal this nation and the world.

The graphic features a dark blue background with a white play button icon in the center. On the right, there is a photograph of the Pennsylvania State Capitol dome. The text is arranged in a clean, modern layout with white and orange accents.

 Pennsylvania Municipal League

## Responding to Political Violence

### Staying Cool as the Temperature Rises

**WEBINAR**



**Tom Knights**  
Butler Township  
Manager



**Will Fuller**  
Common Ground  
USA

Butler Township shares lessons learned from the Trump assassination attempt in 2024, and Search for Common Ground provides resources and advice for defusing and preventing volatile situations.

# Defusing Tension: Understanding and Preventing Violence in Public Meetings

BY COLLEEN HILTON, LMFT, FOUNDER & CEO, ALLI CONNECT

## The Rising Temperature in Public Life

Across the nation local officials are feeling the heat. What once were spirited town-hall meetings have become volatile battlegrounds. Angry outbursts, personal attacks, and threats of violence have become disturbingly common in municipal chambers, public hearings, and even online forums.

Municipal leaders, elected officials, and administrative staff entered public service to strengthen their communities, not to fear for their safety within them. Yet the growing incivility in public life has left many wondering: *What happened to us?* And perhaps more importantly: *What can we do about it?*

Understanding the psychology behind anger and aggression—then pairing that insight with practical de-escalation strategies—can help leaders maintain composure, foster civility, and keep meetings productive and safe.

## The Psychology of Anger and Violence

Anger, at its core, is a protective emotion. It acts like armor—it rises up to shield us from feelings that are far more vulnerable, like fear, shame, grief, or helplessness. When someone feels dismissed, disrespected, or powerless, anger steps in as the body's way of saying, *"I won't be hurt again."*

That's why we often see anger in spaces where people feel unheard or out of control—public meetings, political debates, or moments of community stress. The individual's nervous system perceives a threat, whether emotional or physical, and anger becomes the "safe"

big emotion to express. It's easier to show outrage than to admit fear. It's safer to raise one's voice than to say, *"I feel ignored,"* or *"I don't understand what's happening."*

From a psychological standpoint, anger gives a temporary sense of strength and certainty. It creates an illusion of control in moments that feel unpredictable or overwhelming. But that same protective instinct can quickly turn destructive when unregulated or reinforced by group dynamics. Once anger is validated or echoed by others—especially in a public setting—it becomes amplified, contagious, and difficult to calm.

For municipal leaders, understanding this pattern is powerful. Recognizing that most aggression stems from **fear and vulnerability, not hatred**, allows you to approach heated situations with empathy instead of defensiveness. You don't have to agree with someone to see that they're struggling with something deeper than anger—and when you respond with calm and steadiness, you help lower the emotional "temperature" of the entire room. When people experience anger, the body's **"fight, flight, or freeze"** response takes over. Heart rate rises, adrenaline floods the system, and the rational brain—the prefrontal cortex—temporarily goes offline. This means that in moments of intense anger, logical reasoning, listening, and empathy all become harder to access.

That's why, when someone is yelling or refusing to calm down, reasoning with them often fails. They're not refusing to be rational—they're biologically incapable of being rational in that *moment*. Compounding this is what psychologists call **"emotional contagion."**

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Emotions are contagious. When one person escalates, others subconsciously match their tone, energy, and defensiveness. In crowded or emotionally charged settings—like a public debate—this can quickly spiral.

Finally, our modern media environment adds fuel to the fire. **Echo chambers**—whether in social media feeds or partisan news sources—reinforce outrage and certainty. They frame disagreement not as diversity of thought, but as a personal attack. By the time citizens arrive at a town meeting, many have already rehearsed the conflict in their minds, primed for confrontation.

## Recognizing the Warning Signs Before Violence Erupts

Most acts of public aggression don't come out of nowhere. They build. Learning to spot early indicators can help staff and leaders intervene before tempers boil over.

You can think of it as a **“Green-Yellow-Red”** escalation scale:

Level	Indicators	Best Response
<b>Tension Rising</b>	Restlessness, sighing, muttering, arms crossed, short tone	Maintain calm, acknowledge emotion, keep voice steady
<b>Aggression Emerging</b>	Raised voice, interrupting others, ignoring rules, personal attacks	Set boundaries, enforce meeting structure, validate but redirect
<b>Imminent Threat</b>	Pacing, clenched fists, refusal to de-escalate, physical posturing	Prioritize safety, disengage, contact law enforcement if necessary

Recognizing which “zone” someone is in allows you to respond proportionally and strategically, preventing escalation before it becomes dangerous.

## The Art of De-Escalation

De-escalation isn't about winning an argument—it's about *creating enough calm for communication to resume*. Here are proven techniques you can use immediately:

### 1. Regulate yourself first.

The most powerful tool you have is your own calm. When your body is grounded and your tone is steady, you signal safety. People mirror what they see.

### 2. Lower your voice, don't raise it.

Speaking more quietly compels others to listen more carefully. It also subconsciously reduces perceived threat.

### 3. Acknowledge emotion before addressing content.

Statements like, *“I can see this issue matters deeply to you,”* validate emotion without agreeing or disagreeing on the issue itself.

### 4. Set boundaries respectfully.

*“I want to hear your concerns, but I need you to lower your voice so we can have a real conversation.”* Firm, fair, and consistent limits are not punitive—they're protective.

### 5. Use open, non-threatening body language.

Maintain an open stance, avoid pointing, and keep a safe physical distance. If seated, stay at eye level to avoid power struggles.

### 6. Take breaks when needed.

If tensions remain high, call a recess. It's far easier to prevent escalation than to recover from it.

## Creating a Culture of Safety and Civility

De-escalation isn't just a skill—it's a culture. Municipal organizations can take proactive steps to reduce the likelihood of violence long before an incident occurs.

### 1. Establish clear meeting protocols.

Post and enforce rules of conduct for public meetings. Specify that personal attacks, profanity, and threats will not be tolerated. Consistent enforcement builds predictability and safety.

## 2. Train your teams.

Offer brief annual training on verbal de-escalation, stress management, and recognizing behavioral cues. Many behavioral health organizations—including mine, Alli Connect—partner with local governments to provide tailored training and support.

## 3. Strengthen communication channels.

Citizens often escalate when they feel unheard. Offering structured opportunities for input outside of meetings—such as online surveys or community listening sessions—reduces the pressure that builds in public forums.

## 4. Plan for safety.

Have visible but unobtrusive security. Ensure staff know where exits are, how to signal for help, and how to debrief afterward.

## 5. Support your people.

After heated meetings, normalize emotional reactions. Anxiety, frustration, and even fear are normal responses. Offer access to peer support, employee assistance programs, or local mental health professionals. Unprocessed stress compounds over time and increases burnout risk.

## After the Incident: Recovery and Reflection

Even when handled well, exposure to anger or threats can take a toll. Research shows that **chronic exposure to hostility** increases stress hormones, erodes concentration, and can contribute to long-term anxiety or depression.

Municipal leaders often feel pressure to “shake it off” or maintain composure, but psychological recovery is an essential part of leadership resilience.

After a heated exchange:

- **Debrief as a team.** What went well? What could improve next time?
- **Acknowledge impact.** Give permission to talk about how the incident felt—not just what happened.

- **Reaffirm purpose.** Remember why you’re there: to serve, protect, and improve your community. Re-centering on a mission restores perspective.
- **Follow up proactively.** If threats were made, document and report them. If citizens left visibly upset, reach out later to re-establish respectful communication.

When handled with intention, even tense situations can become opportunities for growth and relationship repair.

## A Shared Responsibility

Preventing violence is everyone’s responsibility—citizens, leaders, staff, and community partners alike. The goal isn’t to eliminate disagreement; disagreement is the heartbeat of democracy. The goal is to keep disagreement from devolving into destruction.

The work of local government is deeply human. It’s where neighbors meet neighbors, where passion meets policy. That proximity makes the work powerful—but also emotionally charged.

By blending compassion with structure, empathy with firmness, and training with teamwork, local leaders can transform moments of potential violence into opportunities for understanding.

## Conclusion: Calm Is Contagious

Every official knows what it’s like to stand at the front of the room, eyes watching, tension thick in the air. In those moments, your calm is not just personal—it’s contagious. When one person steadies the room, others follow. When leaders model respect and patience, it ripples outward.

Violence prevention isn’t about force—it’s about fostering safety, respect, and emotional regulation in ourselves and our communities. In doing so, we protect not just people, but the democratic process itself.

## Practical Tools for Municipal Leaders

**Quick Reference: The 5 Steps to Defusing a Heated Exchange**

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1. **Stay calm and breathe.** Control your tone and body language.
  2. **Acknowledge emotion before content.** (“I see you’re upset.”)
  3. **Set limits with respect.** (“We’ll need to move forward one speaker at a time.”)
  4. **Offer choices.** (“You can finish your comment calmly, or we’ll need to take a break.”)
  5. **Exit safely if escalation continues.**
- **National League of Cities:** Civility in Public Meetings Toolkit
  - **American Psychological Association:** Managing Anger and Difficult Conversations
  - **Alli Connect:** Peer and leadership wellness programs for high-stress professions
  - **PA 211 and EAP Programs:** Connect officials and staff to local support resources

## Meeting Safety Checklist

- Posted rules of conduct
- Clear physical layout and exits
- Pre-identified de-escalation point person
- Post-incident debrief plan
- Local law enforcement contact protocol

## Recommended Resources

- **U.S. Department of Homeland Security:** The Power of Hello campaign

## About the Author

**Colleen Hilton, LMFT** is the Founder and CEO of *Alli Connect*, a mental health technology company providing proactive wellness and early intervention tools for high-stress professions, including public safety and government agencies. A licensed therapist with over 20 years of experience, Colleen specializes in workplace mental health, crisis prevention, and building emotionally resilient organizations.

## When Fear Becomes Personal

Unfortunately, many officials today face not just angry constituents but personal threats—online or in person.

If you find yourself in this position:

### 1 TAKE IT SERIOUSLY.

Don't minimize threats. Report them through appropriate law enforcement and internal channels.

### 2 SET BOUNDARIES FOR ACCESSIBILITY.

Use public email addresses instead of personal ones.

### 3 ENGAGE YOUR SUPPORT NETWORK.

Whether through peers, family, or professional counseling, don't navigate fear alone.

### 4 SEPARATE IDENTITY FROM ROLE.

Remind yourself: anger toward the office doesn't equal anger toward you as a person.

Protecting your own wellbeing is not indulgent—it's what enables you to continue serving effectively.

*Courtesy: Colleen Hilton, LMFT, Alli Connect*

# Addressing Political Threats as a Public Official

BY PETER J. HALESEY, ESQ., CAMPBELL DURRANT, P.C., LEAGUE BUSINESS LEADERS NETWORK MEMBER

The past several years have seen a marked increase in threats of violence against public officials. Unfortunately, in the past year alone a number of these threats have actually been carried out. In June of 2025, one Minnesota state legislator was killed along with her husband while another was seriously injured along with his wife in a shocking act of violence. In our own state, in April of 2025, an individual attempted to assassinate Governor Josh Shapiro and committed arson at the Governor's Mansion. The rise in these violent acts may be attributable, in part, to a growing culture of intense rhetoric that goes beyond normal political expression. Rather than limit their expression to protests, individuals seem to be more apt to threaten violence against both elected and appointed public officials. Understandably, this has caused concern among municipal officials, especially given the fact that, generally, local public officials do not enjoy the level of security afforded to those at the federal or even state level.

Municipal meetings, which give the public the opportunity to address their elected local representatives, often present challenges for officials as some individuals use the meeting as a forum to air personal grievances rather than address matters of public concern. "The current political climate and increased amounts of special interest groups has created a higher level of concern for charged reactions," said Ron Borczyk, Township Manager for Ross Township, Allegheny County. In order to exert some level of control during meetings, Ross Township has instituted policies to govern public comment during its municipal meetings. Those policies include limiting each speaker's time for comment (five minutes in Ross Township's case), requiring that groups wishing

to speak on the same subject nominate one speaker for the group, and specifically limiting comment opportunities to Township residents and taxpayers. "The policies define a base to which all participants can refer when addressing public comments, and meeting attendees are generally respectful of the policy requirements," said Mr. Borczyk. "This creates a better atmosphere for meetings and leads to more productive discussion."

Elected officials agree that establishing rules and regulations for conduct at meetings creates a more positive environment. The Municipality of Mt. Lebanon has also established meeting regulations similar to those instituted by Ross Township. "The atmosphere at our meetings is typically cordial," said Mt. Lebanon Commissioner Anne Swager-Wilson. "Citizens have a right to share their thoughts and we elected officials are there to hear what they have to say." One idea that other municipalities may consider is establishing other bodies where citizens may voice their concerns. "Many of the issues that come before the Commission have already been discussed and debated in one of the five advisory boards we have," said Commissioner Swager-Wilson. "We do not use the Commission Meeting as an additional debate stage." Another critical point to note is that elected officials do not have any affirmative duty to respond to questions during meetings, although each elected official must determine the level of interaction they wish to engage in based on personal situations. The Municipality of Mt. Lebanon accepts comments during the meetings but ensures follow-up with each individual by the municipal official who is most familiar with the subject matter of the comment. "Most often Commissioners listen intently to citizen comments, but then we thank the presenter without

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any additional commentary from the Commission,” said Commissioner Swager-Wilson. “If the citizen has a specific question, we will typically have an employee answer the question, or the Manager will get back to them the next day.”

Despite concerns of heightened tensions, public officials must be cognizant of the fact that individuals have great leeway in their speech as it pertains to what they can say to, and about, public officials. The First Amendment provides broad protection to individuals in what they can say to public officials in both meetings and in other forums, such as on social media. Although, as noted by Mr. Borczyk and Commissioner Swager-Wilson’s comments, municipalities may institute policies regulating certain aspects of speech, municipalities must be cautious that those policies do not infringe upon individuals’ constitutional rights. Courts have found that policies prohibiting “negative, challenging, or critical personally directed comments” are overbroad, *Marshall v. Amuso*, 571 F. Supp 3d 412 (E.D. Pa. 2021), reaffirming the position that public officials must accept even a heightened level of personal criticism. However, officials may adopt content-neutral policies that can serve to engender civil discourse during meetings. Courts have found that content-neutral policies such as requiring a speaker to identify the municipality in which they live, prohibiting speakers from addressing or questioning individual board members and directing their comments to the presiding officer, and permitting the governing body to interrupt or terminate speech pertaining to irrelevant material were permissible. *Miller v. Goggin*, 672 F. Supp 3d. 14 (E.D. Pa. 2023).

Of course, speech classified as true threats, or that which incites violence, is not protected by the First Amendment. In analyzing speech as a true threat, the state must prove that the person “consciously disregarded a substantial risk that his communications would be viewed as threatening violence.” *Counterman v. Colorado*, 600 U.S. 66 (2023). Speech which would incite someone to imminent lawless action is also prohibited under the Supreme Court’s holding

in *Brandenburg v. Ohio*, 395 U.S. 444 (1969). In *Brandenburg*, the Court made it clear that it would only punish speech if it were “directed to inciting or producing imminent lawless action and is likely to incite or produce such action.” In *Hess v. Indiana*, 414 U.S. 105 (1973), the Court said that before an individual’s speech could fall under the category of incitement to imminent lawless action, which would render it unprotected, the speech must lead to “imminent disorder.”

“In the past few years, anti-police and anti-government rhetoric has risen,” remarked Cristyn Zett, Chief of Police for Ross Township. “This includes threats which take a variety of forms, from online harassment and verbal intimidation to doxxing and physical assaults.” “Law enforcement should be informed if you receive a threat that is very specific or detailed regarding you, someone close to you, your address, or includes a specific weapon or threat of violence.” “If the threat contains specific information related to you or your family, for example your spouse’s workplace or children’s school, or anything that would not be public information, then this is also a sign to immediately notify law enforcement.” “Multiple communications from the same person may also be indicative of threats or harassment.” Chief Zett also identified some steps that local officials can take if they feel their safety is compromised. “Any person who experiences threats or unusual communications should maintain a record in a manner that produces a date and time stamp.” “Start by saving any electronic communications and by documenting any in-person in an electronic email, memo or note.” “Depending on the nature of the communication, it may take some time to build a case and involving law enforcement early may be helpful.”

Chief Zett also identified several indicators that would generally signal a potential threat. “Articulate, specific, and direct threats of harm to an individual or individuals would be the most clear signs.” “Physical indicators of a potential attack, i.e. fists clenched, hitting or punching objects, encroaching on controlled areas are also warning signs.” “Patterns of aggressive,

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assaultive, or harassing behavior prior to a meeting or event should also be flagged as early warning signs.” Chief Zett recognized the balance that local officials must strike between ensuring that individuals have the right to be heard while maintaining safety. “Public meetings may include many angry or frustrated people.” “They are allowed to express that and may become quite animated or agitated.” “We recommend working with local law enforcement when you have knowledge that a specific topic or individual may cause an issue.” “Planning a potential response in advance allows for a quicker and better response in the moment.”

Although the First Amendment provides broad protection for an individual’s right to speak, and even speak negatively, of their government, officials are not

without recourse to impose reasonable regulations on speech in order to ensure the safety of both electeds and employees. Municipal governments should not hesitate to follow the above guidance for ensuring civility during meetings and involving law enforcement when actual threats arise.



Taking steps to prevent labor and employment issues is a far better strategy than trying to mitigate them after the fact. We partner with municipalities in every corner of the Commonwealth, helping them address potential risks and create work environments where people and public service can thrive. We'd like to do the same for you.



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# Balancing Safety and Trust: Law Enforcement's Role in Preventing Political Violence

SUBMITTED BY ASPIRANT CONSULTING GROUP, LEAGUE BUSINESS LEADERS NETWORK MEMBER

In recent years, local government meetings have become flashpoints for emotion and, at times, hostility. Elected officials across Pennsylvania have reported receiving threats via social media, email, and even in person during public meetings. Many now find themselves grappling with how to stay safe while maintaining the openness and transparency that citizens expect.

The challenge is complex. A visible police presence can offer reassurance and deterrence; however, it can also create unease if not carefully framed and planned. There is no universal answer for every community, but proven strategies can help local officials prepare, protect themselves, and preserve public trust simultaneously.

### Establishing Pre-Crisis Partnerships



The first time a local government discusses security should not be when someone calls for help.

Establishing a relationship with the police department before tensions arise is essential. Meeting with law enforcement leaders allows municipal officials to share their concerns, learn about available resources, and plan how police will respond if a situation develops.

These early conversations can address practical considerations, such as the layout of council chambers,

entry and exit points, and where an officer might be positioned during a meeting. More importantly, they help both sides understand expectations, what “assistance” means to municipal officials, and how law enforcement defines a threat or disruption.

When these discussions take place early, both sides are prepared. A pre-established relationship between police and municipal leaders ensures that any intervention at a meeting feels measured, not reactive, with officers acting on clear guidance rather than guesswork.

### Setting Expectations and Having a Plan

Preparation is just as crucial as presence. Every local government should have a plan that outlines how officials and staff should respond when someone becomes disruptive but not yet dangerous.

For example, what should happen if a meeting attendee begins shouting or refusing to yield the floor, but has not made any threats or committed a crime? One practical approach is to pause the meeting and allow elected officials to step out briefly. Sometimes this simple act removes the audience the disruptive individual seeks, allowing emotions to settle without confrontation.

Other questions are equally critical:

- Should the person receive a formal warning before being removed?
- Is that warning prewritten and reviewed by the solicitor or liability attorney to ensure consistency and limit procedural concerns?

# ... Staying Cool as the Temperature Rises

- How should multiple disruptive individuals be handled?
- Who makes the call to involve police, and how is that decision documented?

Having these answers in writing ahead of time and ensuring that all participants understand the plan promotes calm and fairness. It also demonstrates to the public that officials are acting in accordance with clear, pre-established procedures, not emotion or politics.



## Choosing the Right Level of Police Presence

Every community is different, and so is every meeting. Some may benefit from a uniformed officer standing visibly near the entrance, a clear signal that disorderly conduct will not be tolerated. In other settings, this visibility might inflame tensions or be perceived as intimidating.

A plainclothes officer or one seated quietly in the room may be a better option when the goal is to maintain discretion and avoid calling attention to security measures. In other cases, an officer stationed outside the meeting room but within easy reach might strike the best balance.

The key is intentionality. Municipal officials and police should discuss not only whether to have an officer present, but how that presence should be perceived. A well-planned, context-specific approach allows law enforcement to serve as partners in democracy, visible enough to deter misconduct, yet discreet enough to allow open dialogue.

## Building a Comprehensive Safety Strategy

Beyond the meeting room, municipalities can take additional steps to strengthen safety and confidence:

- Conduct a joint walkthrough of facilities with law enforcement to assess layouts, entrances, exits, and choke points.

- Develop communication protocols, such as phrases or signals, that allow staff to alert police to potential issues discreetly.
- Train staff and officials to recognize early warning signs of escalating behavior—such as agitation, pacing, or verbal aggression.
- Maintain a documentation process for recording threats or concerning behavior, including those made online or after hours.
- Periodically review and update the plan as personnel or community dynamics change.

When these measures are implemented thoughtfully, they form a framework for consistency and control. They also reassure the public that safety protocols are in place to protect everyone, not to suppress dissent.

## Preserving Openness Through Preparedness

Local government operates best in an atmosphere of civility, accessibility, and respect. Yet maintaining that environment in a polarized age requires foresight and teamwork. Safety and transparency are not competing priorities; they depend on one another.

By meeting proactively with law enforcement, developing a plan for disruptions, and tailoring police presence to the community's culture, municipal officials can help ensure that public discourse remains open and safe. Preparedness is not a sign of fear; it's a reflection of professionalism and respect, for the public, for the process, and for those who serve.



## The Dangers of Aggressive Driving and Road Rage

BY KIM SMITH, PENNDOT DISTRICT 3 SAFETY PRESS OFFICER

Speeding and other aggressive driving behaviors are among the leading factors of highway crashes and fatalities in Pennsylvania. Often, when people hear the term aggressive driving, they think of road rage. But aggressive driving and road rage are not quite the same. Let's take a closer look at both dangerous behaviors.

### Aggressive Driving

Aggressive driving includes speeding, tailgating, weaving in and out of traffic, illegal passing, improper/careless turning and more. If you answer yes to any of these questions, you may be an aggressive driver and are putting yourself, your passengers, and other people on the road at increased risk of a crash.

- Do you speed excessively?
- Do you tailgate slower vehicles?
- Do you race to beat red lights or run stop signs?
- Do you weave in and out of traffic?
- Do you pass illegally on the right?
- Do you fail to yield the right of way to oncoming vehicles?

Aggressive driving has serious consequences. According to PennDOT data, there were 5,897 aggressive driving crashes, resulting in 106 fatalities and 406 suspected serious injuries across the state in 2024.

Driving near an aggressive driver can be unnerving. If you encounter an aggressive driver, PennDOT offers these tips for what to do:

- Get out of their way and don't challenge them.
- Stay relaxed, avoid eye contact, and ignore rude gestures.
- Don't block the passing lane if you are driving slower than most of the traffic.
- Do not attempt to follow or pursue the vehicle. You or a passenger may call the police. But, if you use a cell phone, pull over to a safe location.



### Road Rage

Road rage, which is a criminal offense, is often the result of aggressive driving behavior that escalates into an assault with a vehicle or other dangerous weapon. The offender intends to do harm to others or their property.

For example, a driver becomes so enraged over another driver's actions (i.e., driving too slowly), that they overreact and retaliate with some form of violence such as a physical confrontation, an assault with a motor vehicle, or even use of a weapon.

## ... Staying Cool as the Temperature Rises

If you find yourself the target of road rage, the first thing to do is remain calm. These situations can be scary. Do not react or retaliate; this will only make the situation worse. Avoid eye contact, inflammatory or rude gestures, and horn honking. Finally, if the road rage driver starts following you, stay calm. This is the time to call 9-1-1 or law enforcement and head to the nearest police station.

If you feel yourself becoming enraged when behind the wheel, here are some tips to help keep your emotions in check:

- Get adequate sleep and avoid driving when drowsy.
- Avoiding using your horn or rude gestures out of anger.

- Maintain a safe following distance to give yourself more time to react.
- Be forgiving of another driver's simple mistakes. We have all made driving mistakes.
- Drive in a considerate manner.
- Do not try to slow another driver down by driving slowly or blocking the lane.

To learn more about aggressive driving and other traffic safety topics, please visit [www.penndot.pa.gov/safety](http://www.penndot.pa.gov/safety).

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## Beyond Bad Behavior: Is Violence an Addiction?

BY SUSAN SCHRACK WOOD, DIRECTOR OF COMMUNICATIONS, THE LEAGUE

For centuries, society has viewed violence primarily as a moral failing or a criminal choice. However, research studies in neuroscience and public health are challenging those viewpoints, and suggesting a new way of viewing violent behavior. This new concept moves away from viewing violence solely as a criminal issue and instead examines the idea that that violence may function less like a conscious decision and more like a disease—specifically, an addiction.

### The Neuroscience of Rage

Conventionally, violence and aggression are thought of in terms of negative emotions such as fear, anger, and rage. In thinking about the root causes of violence,



we must figure out what contributes to making people angry. Rage is an emotion that develops over time when people feel they are victims of repeat injustices, and their viewpoints and grievances are unheard or ignored. As these emotions go unresolved, they build up, and as they build, so does the desire for

revenge. This is helped by decades of popular culture, movies, and books that glorify violence as acts of justified revenge. Multiple studies point to this desire for revenge as a root cause of violence and provide evidence that violent actions can release the tensions and rage that have built-up. But in looking at aggression and violence as responses to rage, there can also be positive emotions that are produced. Aggression can feel good in when carried out as revenge. This action is a release that activates the reward-processing circuits in the brain and can make a person feel better after committing a “revenge” action, whether that is making verbal or written threats, or carrying out various levels of physical violent actions. These neural reward circuits are the same ones that provide the “highs” and cravings found in substance addiction<sup>2</sup>. And like addictions, the “high” or positive feeling is many times a short-term emotion that is replaced with remorse or other “negative” emotions. In the addiction cycle, a person will repeatedly seek out a behavior that makes them feel better.

According to some neurological studies, this function in the brain’s reward pathways can cause violent behavior to then shift from being a goal-directed action to a compulsive habit<sup>6</sup>. Just as a person with a substance use disorder craves a drug, an individual prone to violence may experience powerful “cravings” for revenge or generalized violent media or actions. These cravings are driven by the anticipation of pleasure, mirroring the brain chemistry and mechanisms of addiction. Furthermore, genetic research indicates there can be shared genetic risks between violent behaviors and traditional addictions, both in a person’s DNA, and by violent behaviors people are exposed to through the role models in their households<sup>2</sup>.

## Violence is Contagious

If we recognize that exposure to violence can help promote additional violence, then it might be reasonable to think of violence as a contagion. Violence behaves like a contagious and epidemic disease. It meets the recognized definition of disease (signs and symptoms that cause illness and death), it meets the definition of contagious (transmissible and causing more of itself), and it behaves like an epidemic, spreading through households and neighborhoods. Exposure to violence increases the risk of violent behavior by thirtyfold<sup>5</sup>. Exposure to victimized peers in a person's social network also increase the risk. This is similar to elevated risks of disease infection in an exposed group of people.

While the concept of violence as an addiction is an interesting concept to consider, the research community is split on the topic of “behavioral addictions” and the different behaviors that can be included in that definition. While gambling disorder is now recognized as a mental disorder, other addictive behaviors (like internet gaming) remain controversial, and experts argue that more work is needed to validate these diagnoses.

Researchers Kimmel and Rowe viewpoint on violence is that we should view it through a “behavioral addiction” framework, meaning if violence is an addiction or a compulsion, treating it as a public health issue or crisis might prove to be more effective than looking at it solely as a criminal justice issue that relies on incarceration.<sup>2&4</sup> This perspective aligns with the “contagion” theory, which views violence as an epidemic that spreads through exposure and social norms.

## If Violence is a Contagion, Is This the Cure?

Instead of relying solely on a punishment-based model handled by the criminal justice system, the addiction model approach mobilizes health systems to interrupt outbreaks and change community behaviors. Real-world applications of this model, such as the Cure Violence program, have yielded encouraging and significant results<sup>5</sup>:

- **Philadelphia:** Neighborhoods implementing the program saw a **30% reduction in shootings** compared to those that did not.
- **Baltimore:** Participating neighborhoods experienced a **32% decrease in killings**.
- **New York City:** In East New York, gun injuries fell by **50%**, compared to only a 5% drop in comparison precincts.

Despite the promising data, the addiction model faces significant criticism. Scholars like Feuille<sup>1</sup> argue that labeling violence as a medical “addiction” ignores the root causes. There are consequences to simply treating the individual actor. By framing violence as an individual pathology, society risks overlooking the structural inequalities and social contexts that drive it<sup>3</sup>. It can end up being a reactive approach rather than a wholistic, proactive approach. Critics warn that for vulnerable populations and communities—who are already disproportionately impacted by gun violence—medicalizing their behavior could lead to further marginalization and oppression rather than genuine support.

The debate continues: Is violence a crime to be punished, or a craving to be cured? While the addiction model offers a path to reduce the stigma of mental illness and introduces new treatment strategies, it must be balanced against the risk of ignoring the social conditions that foster violence in the first place.

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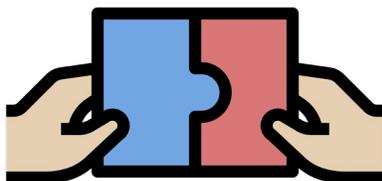
## Prevention & Response: The Search for Common Ground

BY SUSAN SCHRACK WOOD, DIRECTOR OF COMMUNICATIONS, THE LEAGUE

In such a polarized time period, with so many forces working to pull people apart in order to garner “likes” and “wins” for competing agendas, it can be difficult to know where to even start in trying to find common ground that can unite us. While there is no single explanation for what causes political aggression and anger, polarization is a big culprit.

When political opponents are routinely portrayed as existential threats to “the country,” the moral constraints against harming them weaken. Violent metaphors get normalized and can prime people to act. We know that certain topics produce intense moral urgency and will often spark confrontations. The Associated Press has found that when controversial topics are front and center in the national media, it often ignites local politics and agendas. Organized extremist groups or individuals can take advantage of this and fan the flames of people who feel ignored or repressed. As tempers rise, violence and aggression increases.

The Pennsylvania Resilience Network is part of Common Ground USA and is devoted to violence prevention, particularly political violence. It operates on the concept that cooperative relationships are the key to civility. Their research has found that [99.9% of Americans](#), regardless of identity, do not choose acts of political violence and [87% are tired of political division](#). This suggests the majority of Pennsylvanians want to bring people together across dividing lines and transform conflict into collaboration. The Network pulls



together diverse civil society leaders to prevent, defuse, and respond to political violence. The group defines political violence as threats, harassment, intimidation, and physical actions used to limit who participates in public life.

**Will Fuller, State Director for The Pennsylvania Resilience Network,**

recently sat down with The League as part of a



special webinar on [Responding to Political Violence](#). He described three ways of looking at political violence: responding to incidences as they happen, diffusing potential incidences before they occur, and prepping the community beforehand to prevent tension from escalating into violence. While all three, response, diffusion, and prevention, are important for local government leaders to address, Fuller’s group is particularly focused on the prevention aspect.

***“One of the things we stress more than anything when it comes to prevention work is to ask yourself the question, who are the people that either have the trust and the confidence of the community outside of government or who are the people who are on the opposite side of the political aisle from me who have the trust and confidence of the community?”***

Fuller says once those trusted community leaders are identified, the effort should be made to build relationships immediately so that they are established and in place well before there is a need to respond to a violent act.

## . . . Staying Cool as the Temperature Rises

*“We often talk about how it’s too late to exchange business cards over the earthquake. When we do that advanced work of building out those relationships, getting to know them, getting to know their families, what they care about, talking about the community that you love, even if you don’t agree on how to solve the problems in it, you’re coming from a place of care and concern for that community. And it’s important to have those relationships be live and active before anything bad happens at all.”*

Fuller calls this a **“Trusted Advisor Coalition”** that is able to discuss volatile issues and works to understand and respect multiple viewpoints and contexts. He says it is an incredibly important part of the prevention effort, as well as a valuable tool for building cohesion and resilience in a community

*“Usually what we advise is to start with, you know, your small business owners, your faith leaders, your veterans, and your educators. Statistics show that right now, unfortunately, there’s not one any person or group of people that people in America trust. That trust is really diffuse and it’s low in institutions. But what we found is if you pull together a bunch of different places in the community and you get them talking with each other about how what we want to do to make sure our community is safe and a place of thriving and belonging for everybody, those relationships that are alive before the crisis can be drawn upon in it and actually come out stronger on the other side.”*

For overworked local government officials short on time and resources, forming one more group or task force can seem overwhelming. Fuller says not to view this as a series of new things starting from scratch, but rather building on the assets you already have in the community.

*“One example that I would give is to just think about the calendar of events in your community and the moments when people are coming together, uh the county fairs, the the public, you know, sports events, things like that that you know are already gathering places for the*

*community across lines of difference. And ask yourself, how can I turn those into bridge building moments? How can I turn those into places where we lift up community values, where we remind each other of what we care about and who we are at our core, because those are the kinds of things that strengthen the bonds of a community before a crisis happens.”*

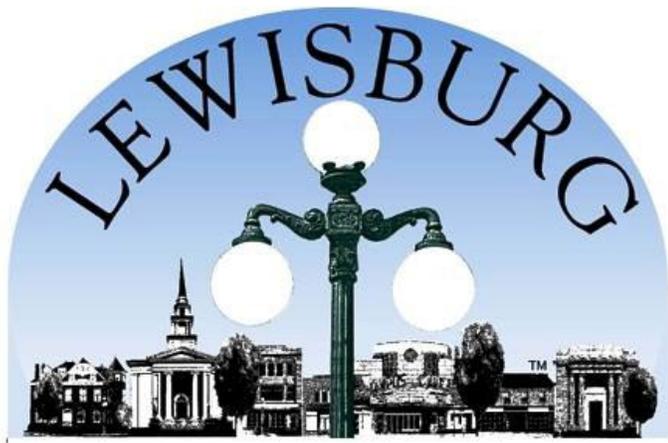
This kind of prevention planning reduces the tendency for polarization. Polarization drives people apart and relies on the assumptions that people make about each other’s thoughts and beliefs. It’s one of the most powerful drivers of resentment, aggression, and violence. It relies on miscommunication and assumption of what people believe others think of them.

*“What drives people further apart is not what ‘I think of you’ but rather ‘what I think you think of me.’ It’s called affective polarization. So that untested assumption about the other side is what drives me more to my side. When you get two people together on opposite ends of the political spectrum doing it or when you get a veteran, a community leader, priest, a rabbi, uh the superintendent, all of them standing in solidarity together, that sends a different message to everybody, including the folks that aren’t in our camp. So when you’re doing public events or when you’re responding to a crisis and you do that holistically, it picks at that division and it causes people to maybe move more toward one another and question that assumption. Uh maybe that’s not true. You know, maybe the other side does care about the community like I do.”*

*For more information on building a Trusted Advisor Coalition, see our next article.*

# Building Trust Before Crisis: A Mayor's Perspective on Strengthening Community Resilience in Lewisburg

BY MAYOR KENDY ALVAREZ, LEWISBURG BOROUGH



Lewisburg often appears to be the quintessential rural small town—especially as winter approaches and downtown glows under holiday lights. Our annual tree lighting ceremony, late-night shopping, and holiday movie screenings draw residents and visitors into a storybook version of small-town life. On the surface, it gives off a Hallmark holiday movie vibe. And in many ways, it truly is that warm and welcoming.

But anyone who has served in local government knows that even the most picturesque communities require constant care. Beneath the surface, rising tensions on a range of issues can boil over at any moment.

In my first term as mayor, Lewisburg has faced quite a few emergencies and emotionally charged moments. We have responded to an active shooter, a college student's fatal drug overdose, severe storms that displaced multiple families, several fires, and a tragic pedestrian death. During each of these moments, I

relied heavily on personal relationships—with our police chief, university administrators, nonprofit leaders, journalists, clergy, and social-service partners—to ensure communication was clear and coordinated. Those relationships were not just helpful; they were essential.

Across the Commonwealth, municipal leaders are experiencing similar patterns. Challenges often begin quietly: conflicting views on school matters, misinformation circulating online, fear-driven rumors, neighborhood disputes, or anxiety about development and demographic change. These signals rarely originate in council chambers. They surface first in classrooms, church basements, waiting rooms, social-service agencies, and downtown storefronts. By the time the issue rises to the level of local government or law enforcement, it has already grown more entrenched and more emotional.

Search for Common Ground has proposed a simple but transformative idea for municipalities navigating this reality: build trust and relationships before crisis emerges. Their “Trusted Leaders Coalition” model brings together people who may not always agree—who may come from different political, cultural, or socioeconomic backgrounds—but who are deeply trusted within their own networks. The coalition meets regularly, shares what they are seeing, builds understanding across lines of difference, and coordinates an early response that prevents conflict from escalating.

## **Why Lewisburg? Why Now?**

Lewisburg sits at the intersection of multiple identities. We are a rural community with deep agricultural roots. We are a college town shaped by Bucknell University's presence. We are a historic downtown enlivened by artists, entrepreneurs, families, and visitors. And we are a borough experiencing the same pressures facing many Pennsylvania municipalities: economic transition, an aging population, youth mental-health needs, public safety concerns, social change, and increasing polarization.

Crucially, these challenges are emerging at a time when public trust in government is at historic lows. More and more, residents do not trust that government is acting in their best interest. Many no longer have faith in elected officials. Some hesitate to accept help because they fear it comes with strings attached or hidden motives. This erosion of trust makes governing more complicated and destabilizing; traditional tools—public statements, informational meetings, policy explanations—do not carry the same credibility they once did.

That is precisely why relationship-based approaches matter. Trust today is built through people, not institutions. When residents hear from someone they already know—a pastor, a teacher, a business owner, a nonprofit leader, or a neighbor—they are far more likely to listen, ask questions, and feel reassured. A Trusted Leaders Coalition embraces this reality and uses it to rebuild confidence in our civic life from the ground up.

And here in Lewisburg, we have something many communities struggle to build: informal networks of trust that quietly maintain stability. Nonprofit directors call clergy when a family is in crisis. School counselors collaborate with social-service organizations. Business owners share what they hear from customers. University administrators alert borough officials to emerging concerns. Journalists check in when they sense a story gaining emotional traction. These relationships often activate long before a problem

becomes public—and they make an enormous difference.

Yet informality has its limits. It relies on personal familiarity that can vanish with leadership turnover. It may unintentionally exclude voices not already connected. And without structure, it offers no formal mechanism for early-warning conversations or coordinated public communication.

Formalizing these existing networks into a Trusted Leaders Coalition would strengthen and stabilize them. It would preserve institutional memory, deepen representation, and ensure that Lewisburg has a proactive system—not just an ad-hoc one—to intervene early, with clarity and trust, when tensions begin to rise.

## **Imagining Lewisburg's Trusted Leaders Coalition**

When I imagine such a coalition, I picture the very people I already reach out to in uncertain moments.

Conflict-resolution experts like Susan Jordan of Susquehanna Valley Mediation and Tracy Strosser of Transitions would anchor the coalition with trauma-informed practices and skilled facilitation. Community health and social-service leaders—Mark Stankiewicz, Cynthia Peltier, Sue Auman, Rachel Herman, and Kim Wheeler—see the daily pressures of housing, childcare, food insecurity, mental-health needs, and regional economic shifts. Education and youth voices—Lynn Pierson, Moe McGuinness, and Gibson O'Mealy—help us understand the earliest signs of polarization, which often appear in youth spaces and on social media long before adults recognize them. Faith leaders like Rev. Tim Hogan add moral grounding and pastoral insight. Public safety, including Chief Dan Embeck, and my own role as mayor ensure that crisis response and communication remain coordinated and transparent. Business and economic leaders—Chad North and Lynne Ragusea—offer a real-time sense of resident sentiment and local economic health. Healthcare leadership from Dr. Jack Devine illuminates emotional and physical

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stressors that impact families and communities. And finally, local journalism—represented here by Bill Bowman of The Daily Item—helps interpret how narratives form and how they can be corrected or clarified before misinformation takes hold.

Together, these leaders see the full picture of community wellbeing.

## **How a Coalition Like This Would Strengthen Lewisburg**

A Trusted Leaders Coalition would meet consistently, not only in moments of crisis. It would allow leaders to share what they're observing and collaborate on responses—from calming communication, to dialogue sessions, to quiet interventions that never make the news yet prevent real harm.

Most importantly, it distributes responsibility: no single leader carries the weight of community conflict alone.

Residents can feel confident knowing that even when disagreements arise, the people entrusted to guide the community are communicating, cooperating, and committed to listening with respect.

## **A Model for Municipalities Across Pennsylvania**

The framework is simple: build relationships before they are needed, create channels for early warning, and coordinate trusted responses that keep disagreement from becoming division.

In an era marked by declining trust and rising polarization, Lewisburg shows another way forward—one rooted in connection, communication, and shared stewardship.

And if there is one lesson I have learned as mayor, it is this: the strongest time to build the relationships that keep a community safe is before a conflict begins.

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# Proactive Resilience: A Strategic Framework for Community Trauma Response

BY KATE NELSON, STRONG CITIES NETWORK / FORMER CITY OF BOISE DEPUTY CHIEF OF STAFF

Views expressed here do not necessarily reflect those of the Strong Cities Network, member cities or its Management Unit

In the modern landscape of municipal governance, city leaders face a daunting paradox. We are expected to be the first line of defense when our communities fracture—whether from hate crimes, mass violence, or polarizing unrest. Yet, as outlined in recent case studies, cities often face significant hurdles: we operate without a clear mandate to lead prevention efforts, possess limited resources to develop new policies, and struggle against bureaucratic constraints that impede rapid local action.

Across the Strong Cities Network, we see this struggle repeated. Cities are often left to manage the “invisible cost” of crisis: eroded trust, decreased mental wellbeing, and slowed economic recovery. In Boise, Idaho (a city of approximately 240,000 residents across 80 square miles), where I served in the City Government from 2020 to 2025, we realized that trauma is not just a mental health issue; it is a civic infrastructure issue. To protect that infrastructure, we embarked on a rigorous development process to create the Community Trauma Response (BCTR) Plan. The resulting framework is highly adaptable and commensurate with the demographics and scale of small to mid-sized cities.

This is the story of how we moved from a reactive stance to one of Proactive Resilience, and how your city can adapt this model to fill the gaps in your own safety net.

## The Invisible Cost of Crisis

The decision to invest time in a “soft” asset like a trauma response plan was driven by hard data. We define a Community Traumatic Event (CTE) as one that is extremely negative, uncontrollable, and sudden. Emergency responders, including Fire and Police, are expertly trained to handle all phases of a crisis,

including natural disasters, technological failures, and mass violence. This plan does not compete with or duplicate those essential emergency management functions. Instead, the BCTR Plan is designed to support our civic leaders—the Mayor and City Council—to keep the peace, act as the unifying force, and strategically oversee the community’s emotional and social recovery long after first responders have concluded their immediate, life-saving duties.

The real-world consequences of this gap are immediate and logistical. In Boise, prior to the development of our plan, a well-intended response to an act of violence at a local hospital inadvertently led to an ambulance bay being blocked when community members created a spontaneous memorial. This act of kindness posed critical safety concerns and created additional labor for hospital staff. Already under strain, medical personnel were forced to divert attention from patient care to move items and manage overwhelmed offers of assistance.

This incident illuminated a critical lesson: without a plan, even “help” can become a hazard.



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The “Typical Phases of Disaster” curve further illustrates this trajectory. Immediately after an event, there is often a “Honeymoon” phase of community cohesion. But without structure, this inevitably gives way to a deep trough of “Disillusionment”—a period where grief turns to anger, and civic fabric tears.

We realized that if we didn’t have a plan to bridge the gap during the “Disillusionment” phase, we were leaving our community vulnerable to a secondary wave of crisis.

## Response and Prevention: A Dual Mandate

We approached the BCTR Plan with a dual mandate. First, we needed an Immediate Response tool—a way to provide rapid, coordinated support that stabilizes the community without causing further harm (re-traumatization). Second, we sought Preventative Stabilization. We found that the mere existence of a plan signals to residents that their city is prepared, reducing anticipatory fear and increasing trust before a crisis even occurs.

The entire planning effort was funded by a one-time allocation from the Mayor’s Office budget and had an ambitious one-year deadline. This strict timeline was challenging, but it kept the Core Team focused and enabled tidy, quarterly deliverables, ensuring momentum never flagged.

To achieve our goals, we engaged in a rigorous “Human-Centered Design” process, focusing on “Filling Gaps” where no clear lead agency existed.

## The Engine of Resilience: The Core Team

The success of the BCTR Plan—both in its creation and its future execution—relies heavily on the structure of the Core Team. In our plan, the Core Team is a group of senior leaders from a specific, interdisciplinary body comprised of representatives from Fire, Law Enforcement, Health, Education, and the Mayor’s Office. This composition was critical. By bringing these specific sectors together, we ensured that the plan was not “owned” by a single silo, but rather shared across the vital organs of the city.

### The Core Team’s Role in Creation:

During the development phase, the Core Team provided the essential oversight required to navigate bureaucratic hurdles. They defined the specific

“activation events” (such as hate crimes or mass violence) that would trigger the plan and established the engagement strategy. Their cross-sector authority allowed us to “complement, not compete” with existing emergency protocols.

At least **one** of these criteria are true:

- Fatality
- High potential community trauma
- Potential fatality
- Non-fatal violence

↑ AND ↓

At least **two** of these criteria are true:

- | Event                                    | Individual                               | Community  |
|--|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Unexpected      | <input type="checkbox"/> Youth           | <input type="checkbox"/> # of people impacted    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Infrequent      | <input type="checkbox"/> Protected class | <input type="checkbox"/> Elevated risk to people |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Public location | <input type="checkbox"/> Public person   | <input type="checkbox"/> Under-resourced         |

(or other considerations, as identified)



Crucially, we relied on the support of an outside consulting firm. We could not have completed the dozens of listening sessions with hundreds of individuals and incorporated this input without professional support. Just as, if not more, important, we had to have the right consultants—ones that were mission-aligned, adept at working within city government processes, and skilled at graphically representing complex information in comprehensive but easy-to-understand ways. We succeeded in large part because of having the right strategic partners.

### The Core Team’s Role in Execution:

In the event of a crisis, the Core Team serves as the stable center of gravity. Their primary function is to avoid the paralysis of decision-making. When a potential crisis hits, the Core Team convenes to utilize a strict Activation Criteria Checklist. This objective tool asks: Is there a fatality? Is the event unexpected? Does it affect a protected class?

If the criteria are met, the Core Team activates the plan and deploys Tiger Teams—cross-functional groups of

# ... Staying Cool as the Temperature Rises

frontline staff and community partners (such as youth counselors or faith leaders) who act as boots-on-the-ground responders. The Core Team remains in the “command center,” handling communications and resource allocation, allowing the Tiger Teams to focus on community stabilization.

## The Framework in Action: A Cycle of Resilience

Emergency plans are essential, but the BCTR model is designed for continuous engagement, utilizing a cycle of three states: Readiness, Activation, and Steadiness. We recently saw this framework tested in real-time following a tragic fire that took the lives of young children and left others in critical condition.

### 1. Readiness: The Power of “Blue Sky” Planning

In the “Green” state, our focus is on connection. Because we had utilized this time to break down silos, the Police Core Team member was able to quickly alert the rest of the Core Team the moment the tragedy occurred.

### 2. Activation: Clarity in Chaos

The Core Team convened and determined the evaluation criteria were met, moving the plan from Readiness to Activation. Unlike previous incidents, there was no confusion about roles. A Tiger Team was immediately formed, which included leadership from the neighborhood association and a church close to the site of the fire. Residents were able to support those closest to the loss in an organized fashion, ensuring that the support provided was wanted, helpful, and did not interfere with emergency operations.

### 3. Steadiness: Heal the Healer

Eventually, the immediate crisis fades, and we move to the “Grey” state. Here, we focus on the transition to long-term support and the wellbeing of our staff. Crucially, we included a protocol we call “Heal the Healer.” We recognized that city staff and community partners absorb immense trauma during a response. Our plan explicitly includes debriefing and mental health support for the responders themselves, ensuring our internal capacity remains intact for the future.

## The Pillars of Success: Essential Prerequisites for Adaptation

For any municipality looking to adopt the BCTR framework, the infrastructure of the plan itself is secondary to the quality of the commitment behind it. The following three elements are absolutely essential for a successful launch and sustained impact:



1. Sustained Executive Leadership (The ‘Why’): The plan requires complete buy-in and demonstrable trust from the Mayor and/or City Manager. This initiative cannot be treated as a side project delegated to mid-level management; it must be championed by an executive leader who publicly owns the long-term vision. This buy-in signals to all city departments that trauma response is a strategic priority, not an optional activity.
2. Empowered Core Team (The ‘How’): Core Team members must not only understand the vision but also possess executive-level authority to make cross-departmental decisions in real-time. This interdisciplinary team—representing critical sectors like Fire, Police, Health, Education, and Administration—must have the license to operate outside of traditional organizational boundaries when the plan is activated.
3. Community Commitment (The ‘Reach’): The plan’s reach must extend deep into the community’s fabric. Success requires the committed involvement of key community leaders and institutional partners, including:
  - Large Employers and Hospital Systems
  - University and School District Leadership
  - Non-profit and Faith Community Leaders
  - Groups representing special populations (seniors, physically disabled, unhoused, etc.)

These partners form the vital “Tiger Teams” and provide the distributed intelligence needed to tailor support effectively.

## Findings: Improving Civic Infrastructure

Qualitative data obtained after we moved from Activation to Steadiness following the fire clearly articulated the value of this approach:

1. Community Ownership: Residents expressed a profound sense of ownership, pride, and relief. They were grateful for the opportunity to participate in providing support in a structured, meaningful way.

# Responding to Political Violence . . .

2. Relief for Responders: Emergency responders expressed significant relief and gratitude. They reported that knowing support for the victims would continue after their jobs as first responders concluded allowed them to focus on their duties without the lingering “moral injury” of leaving a grieving family unsupported.
3. The Value of Connection: Perhaps the most surprising finding emerged not from the plan’s execution, but its creation. During the development phase, organizations that had long worked adjacent to one another—such as school district officials and neighborhood associations, or faith leaders and emergency managers—connected for the first time. This “blue sky” collaboration provided tremendous value, fostering a pervasive sense of safety and belonging. Participants reported feeling part of something bigger than their individual mandates, creating a resilient web of relationships that adds value to the city every day, not just during a crisis.

Through our outreach and research, we identified several other key benefits that extend beyond simple crisis management. By implementing this framework, cities can achieve:

- Communication: Increased reach and coordination of messaging during an event, reducing the spread of misinformation.
- Resources: Increased awareness of partner resources (from food banks to mental health services) and how to leverage them immediately.
- Network: The breaking down of professional silos, creating a web of relationships that functions even when there is no crisis.
- Pathway: Clear direction for staff and residents on “who to talk to and when.”

For cities in the Strong Cities Network, the BCTR Plan offers a blueprint to overcome the lack of expertise and bureaucratic constraints that often hinder us. By acknowledging the “invisible cost” of trauma, we move beyond crisis management toward true, proactive resilience.

The persistent global challenges of polarization, ideological violence, social isolation and the unchecked spread of mal-, dis- and misinformation are not abstract external forces; they are the cumulative symptoms of an invisible, internal crisis within our communities: the unacknowledged cost of collective

trauma. For too long, governments—at all levels—have operated in crisis mode, constrained by the amorphous and complex nature of these threats, failing to confront the profound civic and psychological injuries they inflict. The status quo of passive management is, therefore, not merely ineffective—it is actively harmful to the health and resilience of our cities. For cities in the Strong Cities Network and beyond, the BCTR Plan offers a vital, transformative path forward. It moves beyond crisis management by translating these intangible threats into a tactical, structured, and achievable operating plan. Its power lies in its whole-of-city approach, which deliberately distributes resources, workload, and expertise across political leadership, municipal staff, faith leaders, private industry, educational institutions and community partners, ensuring the impact realized is exponentially greater than any single entity could achieve. By formally acknowledging the invisible cost of trauma, we commit to a vision of community made possible by political will, data-driven thinking, and collaborative action. This commitment is the necessary first step toward true, proactive resilience, ensuring that our cities do not just survive the current threats but emerge as models of stability, trust, and collective well-being.

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# Healing in the Public Square: Greenway and Blueway Spaces as Civic Infrastructure

*How nature can defuse rage, restore trust, and renew community across Pennsylvania*

**BY GENE VENNO, DIRECTOR OF GOVERNMENT AFFAIRS AND PUBLIC ADVOCACY AT THE SUSQUEHANNA RIVER BASIN COMMISSION**

As persistent waves of violence and rage ripple through our communities, we find ourselves at a crossroads. One path leads to continued fragmentation—where conflict escalates, trust erodes, and civic life frays. The other path leads to healing—where cooperation, reflection, and shared spaces help us rediscover what it means to belong. This second path is not a dream. It is a choice. And nature can help us make it.



Green and blue spaces—parks, rivers, gardens, tree-lined streets, and reflective water features—are more than aesthetic amenities. They are psychological infrastructure, capable of calming minds, restoring relationships, and renewing civic spirit. Across Pennsylvania’s 67 counties, these spaces are proving essential to the health and vitality of our neighborhoods.

The evidence is compelling. A University of Pennsylvania study found that cleaning and greening vacant lots in Philadelphia led to a 29% reduction in gun violence, a 22% decrease in burglaries, and a 30% drop in nuisances such as noise complaints and illegal dumping. The Pennsylvania Department of

Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR) reports that outdoor recreation is strongly linked to mental well-being, with residents affirming that time in parks and forests reduces stress and improves emotional health. Economically, outdoor recreation contributes about \$13.6 billion annually to Pennsylvania’s economy, and the Commonwealth ranks sixth nationally in outdoor recreation spending. These numbers confirm that nature is not just beautiful—it is practical, measurable, and transformative.

But this is not merely about beautification. It is about integration. Nature must be woven into the architecture of public life. Parks become places of learning. Gardens become sites of reconciliation. Rivers become metaphors for renewal. When natural spaces are treated as essential civic infrastructure—rather than optional amenities—they invite reflection, dialogue, and healing. They become the connective tissue of a community.

Healing also requires confronting the roots of rage and violence. That means investing in our youth—not through punitive measures, but through education, mentorship, and skill-building programs that offer hope and alternatives. It means fostering trust between law enforcement and residents through transparency, joint initiatives, and open communication. It means advocating for sensible gun safety policies and addressing the socioeconomic disparities that often fuel conflict.

Nature can be a powerful partner in these efforts. When schools, families, businesses, and local governments

# Responding to Political Violence . . .

align around shared stewardship of natural spaces, they create a culture of care. This alignment fosters empathy, trust, and a sense of belonging—qualities essential to any thriving democracy. It also strengthens every initiative, from public safety to education to economic development. Nature is not a backdrop; it is a bridge.

Pennsylvania offers vivid examples. The Susquehanna River, one of the nation’s great waterways, provides recreational opportunities to millions—fishing, boating, hiking, and quiet reflection along its banks. Pittsburgh’s riverfront redevelopment has transformed industrial corridors into vibrant civic spaces. Lancaster’s green infrastructure projects show how stormwater management can double as community beautification. The Lackawanna River, once scarred by industrial pollution, is now a nationally recognized American Heritage River, offering trails and trout fishing that reconnect residents of Scranton and surrounding towns to their natural heritage. In Altoona and Blair County, tributaries like the Little Juniata River and Beaverdam Branch are being revitalized through conservation partnerships that blend flood mitigation with public access and recreation. From rural trails in Tioga County to urban parks in Philadelphia, nature is already proving its power to heal. The task now is to expand and align these efforts across all 67 counties.

It is important to recognize the leadership that makes these efforts possible. Governor Josh Shapiro and members of the State Governmental Committees have worked to prioritize the restoration of green and blue spaces across the Commonwealth. Their commitment underscores that nature is not a partisan issue, but a shared investment in public health, safety, and community resilience. By supporting initiatives that restore rivers, expand parks, and green our cities, state leaders are helping municipalities build the psychological infrastructure needed for a stronger Pennsylvania.

Municipalities in Pennsylvania can establish greenways and blueways by embedding them into local planning, building strong partnerships, securing funding, and managing them as civic infrastructure. Yes, budgets are tight everywhere, and that’s a challenge. Successful endeavors find ways to take advantage of existing needs – such as stormwater management requirements or other infrastructure upgrades – and leverage that work to incorporate elements of greenways and blueways.

The process typically involves community visioning, corridor identification, acquisition or easements, design with green infrastructure, phased construction, and long-term stewardship. Pennsylvania offers vivid illustrations of this approach: the **Brandywine Creek**



# ... Staying Cool as the Temperature Rises

**Greenway**, spanning 24 municipalities in Chester and Delaware Counties, shows how regional collaboration and nonprofit leadership can protect riparian buffers while connecting parks and historic sites; the **Path of the Flood Trail** in Cambria County demonstrates how heritage and natural landscapes can be woven together, transforming the route of the 1889 Johnstown Flood into a nationally recognized recreational and cultural corridor; and the **Westmoreland County Greenways & Blueways Network** highlights how county-level planning can align multiple municipalities under a shared vision, blending environmental protection with recreation and smart growth. Together, these examples confirm that when municipalities treat greenways and blueways as civic infrastructure, they create spaces that heal communities, foster trust, and strengthen resilience.

- **Brandywine Creek Greenway:** A lush corridor of riparian buffers and historic sites, spanning 24 municipalities.
- **Path of the Flood Trail:** A heritage-rich route transformed into a vibrant recreational trail.
- **Westmoreland County Greenways & Blueways Network:** A county-wide vision blending smart growth, recreation, and environmental resilience.

Municipal leaders can harness this power by making greenways and blueways part of everyday planning.

## The steps are straightforward:

- **Listen to residents** through community meetings to shape a shared vision.
- **Identify corridors** like riverbanks, old rail lines, or floodplains that can connect neighborhoods.
- **Secure land or easements** with help from land trusts and local partners.
- **Design with nature in mind**—using native plants, stormwater features, and safe trails.

- **Build in phases**, starting small to show quick results.
- **Find funding** through state grants, federal programs, and public-private partnerships.
- **Ensure long-term care** with volunteer groups and “Friends of the Greenway” organizations.

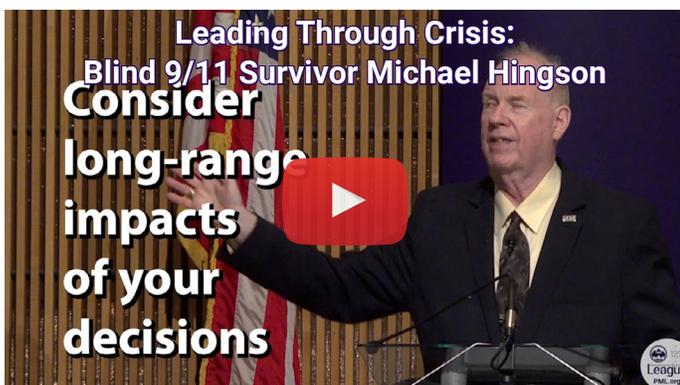
Let us move from fragmentation to harmony. Let us cultivate a culture of compassion, rooted in nature and nurtured by community. The path to a brighter future begins with a walk in the park, a moment by the water, and a shared breath beneath the trees. In these moments, we rediscover what it means to belong—not just to a place, but to each other.

As we look ahead to a new year, let us commit to building communities that heal. Let us invest in the quiet power of nature and the enduring strength of civic alignment. The public square is waiting. The trees are listening. The rivers are ready. All we need to do is begin—together.

## About the Author

**Gene G. Veno** is a lifelong Pennsylvanian, civic advocate, and educator. A native of Scranton, he has held leadership roles including Chairman of the Lackawanna County Home Rule Commission and Vice President of the Scranton School Board. He is the author of *Navigating The Corridors of Power* and currently serves as **Director of Government Affairs and Public Advocacy at The Susquehanna River Basin Commission.**

# Videos From This Year's Municipal Leadership Summit





**PennPRIME**  
INSURANCE TRUSTS | A Service Program of The League



## PennPRIME Insurance Trusts

SUBMITTED BY LORI HEENAN, DIRECTOR OF TRUSTS

Members of both Trusts receive personalized support from attorneys, claim adjusters, loss prevention representatives, underwriters, and other professionals experienced in municipal operations. Both Trusts include a loss control grant program, designed to financially assist **our members with safety and risk management initiatives** they choose to prioritize. We also develop comprehensive claims reviews and work with our members to facilitate optimal claims management every step of the way. With the depth and array of coverages and services PennPRIME offers, we are truly a one-source provider.

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It is our goal to serve our members and to keep up with all the ways your communities are moving forward through hard work and collaboration. We are always looking for new members and are happy to offer a quote to any qualifying entity for either Worker's Compensation, Property and Liability or both.



## Newly Elected & Appointed Officials Training

Serving Together: The Municipal Leadership Program

*A training program for new and experienced municipal officials.*

*Join us every other Friday from 9 a.m. - 12 p.m. for live online sessions led by experienced municipal leaders and subject matter experts. Each session dives into the key topics you need to succeed – from budgeting and public engagement to ethics, leadership, and decision-making.*

**Sessions are January 30, February 13, February 27 and March 13, 2026.**

**Registration Opens Friday, December 19, 2025!**

[PML.org/training-development/newly-elected-and-appointed-officials-training](https://PML.org/training-development/newly-elected-and-appointed-officials-training)



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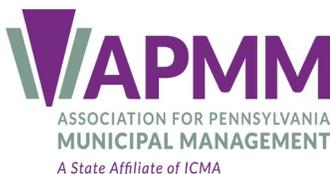
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355 Park Ave, Youngsville, NC 27596

# APMM President's Message



**DAN SANTORO**  
MANAGER  
CRANBERRY TOWNSHIP



**APMM.net**

*Greetings Municipal Managers and Elected Officials,*

*As we turn the final page on another year of public service, I find myself reflecting on the many challenges we have navigated together and the tremendous progress our communities have made because of your leadership. What began last winter with Punxsutawney Phil forecasting a stubbornly long season of cold evolved into a year marked by collaboration, innovation, and a renewed commitment to the foundations of good government.*

*This year offered powerful reminders of the value of connection, a theme woven throughout APMM's history. Whether celebrating organizational milestones, honoring long service, or marking community anniversaries, we saw that our greatest advances come from learning with and from one another. Our conferences, workshops, and peer networks continue to be the places where challenges are demystified, solutions take shape, and municipal professionals find the support they need to carry the work forward.*

*This issue's theme, navigating political violence, calls us to reflect on a growing challenge for local governments across the country. Municipal managers and elected officials increasingly find themselves on the front lines of community tension, polarization, and at times outright hostility. While national rhetoric may grab headlines, it is at the local level where its impacts are most acutely felt: in council chambers, community meetings, public comment sessions, and even daily interactions with residents.*

*As municipal professionals, our response must be grounded in the principles that define our profession: civility, impartiality, transparency, and an unwavering commitment to public safety and public trust. We are responsible for shaping forums where disagreement can occur without dehumanization, where residents feel safe to speak, and where elected leaders can model constructive dialogue. We can lead by setting expectations for respectful engagement, ensuring staff and officials receive training in de-escalation and threat-awareness, and developing policies that protect both free expression and physical safety. At a time when violence, whether threatened or actual, has real consequences for civic participation, our municipalities must remain places where democratic processes are safeguarded and where community members can engage one another with dignity.*

*The work is challenging, but it is essential. It demands resilience, clarity of purpose, and a dedication to serving others that is often unseen but always felt. Yet every day, across Pennsylvania, municipal professionals show what principled, pragmatic leadership looks like.*

*Thank you for your service, your partnership, and the countless ways you strengthen your communities. I look forward to learning from you, working alongside you, and building another year of progress together.*

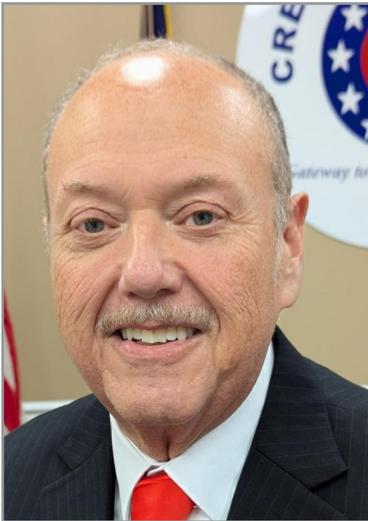
*Wishing you a safe, peaceful, and hopeful start to the year ahead.*

*Sincerely,*

*Dan Santoro*

Dan Santoro

# PSATC President's Message



TODD K. MILLER  
COMMISSIONER  
CRESENT TOWNSHIP



[firstclasstownship.org](http://firstclasstownship.org)

*Violence is unpredictable and can occur at any place or time. As public servants, we frequently encounter upset individuals. Fortunately, there are measures you can take to prevent tense encounters from escalating into violence.*

*You may find yourself in a situation where you are approached by an individual who is displaying anger, possibly without prior warning. How should one respond in such circumstances?*

*Sometimes your instinct is to run or fight, but that's often not practical, especially if you're dealing with residents, employees, or even family members. These moments are emotional for everyone, and fleeing or confronting isn't usually an option. So, what are your alternatives?*

*Here is a Seven Step Approach for Providing Personal Safety while Handling Potentially Violent Scenarios.*

## **1. Situational awareness**

*Begin by assessing your emotional state, recognizing that managing your emotions is within your control. Demonstrating emotional self-regulation is essential; ensure you consistently convey composure.*

*Next, observe the area around you. Look for available exits and note who is nearby. Consider whether there is a significant risk of harm to yourself.*

*Monitor the individual's verbal and nonverbal behavior and assess the extent to which their actions have escalated.*

*Ensure that you develop a comprehensive plan for your approach and consider potential exit strategies if necessary. Always prioritize your safety.*

## **2. Choose your words carefully**

*Avoid telling someone to "Calm down." Consider how you'd react if you were upset. Your emotions can influence your words, and if you're scared, it will show when you speak. Keep an eye on your tone and volume—sounding bureaucratic, argumentative, or bossy may escalate the situation. Usually, speaking slowly and calmly helps the other person match your pace and mood.*

## **3. Acknowledge the problem**

*It's best to address the obvious issue directly rather than ignore it. Recognize the person's feelings and use open-ended questions to better understand their perspective, such as, "I can see you're upset—how can I support you?" or "You seem angry; what's happening?" Keep in mind that simply asking if someone is upset when it's already clear may damage your credibility and could provoke a negative reaction.*

#### **4. Be a great listener**

*While maintaining a safe distance, use your body positioning and non-verbal actions to show the person you are there to listen. Orient yourself towards the person, open up your arms, raise your eyebrows and make respectful eye contact. Invite them to talk and remember it is not about you. Use small verbal encouragements to let them know you are listening (e.g., sure, okay, yes, etc). Resist the urge to interrupt and ask your next question.*

#### **5. Be empathetic**

*Dealing with their emotions first is an effective defusing technique. Be empathic and explore their feelings by using non-judgmental questions. Express your goal to try to comprehend where they are coming from. Ask open-ended questions that help you understand their situation. "I'd like to hear more about how you're feeling." Use their name if possible and express that "we" will get this sorted out together.*

#### **6. Use silence**

*Silence in a normal conversation is often awkward, yet it can be very helpful in angry confrontations. Using silence helps a person slow down their thinking and regain composure and it buys you some time. Lead into a silence break by putting the onus on yourself, "That's an important point, give me a minute to think about that." "We've covered a lot of ground; I need a moment to collect my thoughts on what we've talked about."*

#### **7. Give choices**

*People often become angry or violent because they feel they have lost control of a situation. They feel someone has either done something to them or is not doing something for them.*

*Providing them with choices helps them regain control of themselves. Refocus the individual on their issue and if possible, offer them choices: "I can take down your complaint in writing, or would you rather write it out in your own words?" "Do you want to tell me what happened first or how this made you feel?" " We can fill out the application together or you can do it on your own."*

*Your overall goal is to respond to these situations confidently, effectively and safely. There is no "one size fits all" approach to managing aggressive and abusive conduct but being prepared is critical to successfully defusing a situation. Remember: "Failing to prepare is preparing to fail." So, take some time to think about your more common conflict situations. Visualize how you will act when responding positively. And finally, practice, practice, practice!*

*I hope everyone has a conflict free Holiday Season!*

Sincerely,

*Todd K. Miller*

Todd K. Miller

# Legislative Status Report STATE



PREPARED BY AMY STURGES, LEAGUE DEPUTY EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR – ADVOCACY – [asturges@pml.org](mailto:asturges@pml.org)  
KAITLIN ERRICKSON, GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS MANAGER – [kerrickson@pml.org](mailto:kerrickson@pml.org)

*All legislation can be found on the General Assembly's website:*

[legis.state.pa.us](http://legis.state.pa.us)

## Legislative Update

### Capitol Conference Webinar Series

#### Local Government Transparency: AI Right to Know Requests and Meeting Agenda Notices

*December 18 at 11:30 a.m.*

Transparency is at the core of local government, with the Right to Know Law and Sunshine Act setting the standards. While transparency always remains the goal, it is sometimes necessary to modify the laws to meet the needs and technologies of modern day.

As AI continues to become more and more commonplace, it has begun to seep into the world of local government, particularly in Right to Know requests. How should your municipality respond to AI generated requests?

Additionally, last week the PA Supreme Court overturned a Commonwealth Court ruling limiting when and how an agenda can be modified after the 24-hour posting established under Act 65 of 2021.

Please join us for our next Capitol Conference Webinar on Thursday, December 18 at 11:30 am.

Liz Wagenseller, Executive Director of the Office of Open Records, will provide an overview of the abundance of AI requests that have appeared in the last few years, as well as guidance as to how local governments should handle such requests. Senator Tracy Pennycuick (invited), will speak to her legislation, Senate Bill 431, which would allow municipalities to deny AI requests under certain circumstances. Finally, Casey Rankin, Esq. GRB Law, will provide more details regarding the PA Supreme Court decision.

Following their presentations, the speakers will hold a brief Q&A with attendees.

[Register Now](#)

## NLC Federal Update: Energy Choice Legislation Would Preempt Local Government

The [Energy Choice Act \(HR 3699\)](#) is bipartisan legislation, led by Representative Nick Langworthy of New York, along with 130+ other Republicans and 3 Democrats, that would preempt state and local authority around energy issues. The bill was marked up in the House Energy and Commerce Committee in early December, and it could potentially move to the floor before the end of the year or in January.

While the bill is only one sentence, it's written in a way that is overly broad and would seemingly block many local building codes and energy policies, including those invoked during emergency situations.

### Bill Language:

A State or local government, or instrumentality or regulatory agency thereof, may not adopt, implement, or enforce a law, regulation, ordinance, building code, standard, or policy that prohibits or limits, or has the effect of directly or indirectly prohibiting or limiting the connection, reconnection, modification, installation, transportation, distribution, expansion, or access to an energy service based on the type or source of energy that is sold in interstate commerce to be delivered to an end-user of such energy service.

Please find a summary of the bill and its implications [here](#).

Lastly, The League has opposed similar legislation at the state level, with Senator Gene Yaw introducing energy choice legislation over the last few legislative sessions.

## 2025 Local Government Center Awards For Local Government Excellence

Nominations for the 2025 Governor's Awards for Local Government Excellence are now open. Each year, the Governor's Awards for Local Government Excellence are presented to local government leaders who have demonstrated exceptional dedication to improving public services through innovative projects or initiatives. [Submit your nominations](#) for the 2025

Governor's Awards for Local Government Excellence now through January 15, 2026.

## Cosponsor Memos

### Free Millings for Municipalities

Representative Jeff Olsomer has announced his intention to introduce legislation requiring any millings obtained by PennDOT within a municipality must first be offered free of charge to that municipality, provided that the municipality agrees to transport the material from a site determined by PennDOT. If the municipality declines, then the milling would be offered for sale.

### Housing Package

Representatives Jared Solomon, Abby Major, and Joe Hogan have announced their intention to introduce a three bill legislative package addressing housing.

1. The first bill would create a dedicated funding stream to expand construction trade training across the Commonwealth through a modest fee counties and municipalities may charge on residential building permits.
2. The second bill would direct the Joint State Government Commission to study the development of a housing accelerator, as well as a review of state and local housing policies.
3. The third bill would establish a 30 to 60 day timeline for municipalities to review and approve or deny a permit application, with the number of days dependent on the size of the project.

### Local Use of Radar

Senator Nick Miller has announced his intention to introduce legislation authorizing the use of local radar for full-time police officers.

## Legislation Affecting Local Government

### County Maintained Contact List of Property Owners

*First Consideration in the Senate, November 19, 2025*

[House Bill 858 \(PN 1806\)](#), introduced by Representative Jared Solomon, would amend Title

68 (Real and Personal Property) requiring a county's chief assessor to create and maintain a list of contact information for every property owner within their jurisdiction. Properties, either owned by an individual or a company, would be added to the list within 30 days of purchase or at the time a property is cited for a code violation. A municipality may request the contact information from the county chief assessor if a reasonable need is demonstrated.

A county may levy a fine up to \$500 against a property owner or its representative for failure to provide contact information or for providing false contact information.

Owner-occupied property would be exempt from this bill.

### **Older Building Redevelopment Assistance Grant Program Act**

*First Consideration in the House, November 19, 2025*

[House Bill 1664 \(PN 2626\)](#), introduced by Representative Joe Ciresi, would create the Older Building Redevelopment Assistance Grant Program Act.

The Department of Community and Economic Development (DCED) would administer the program and properties that are 50 years or older would be eligible for the grant to rehabilitate, redevelop, or enhance the property. The application must include a description of the project, a redevelopment plan, and detail how the project will contribute to the local economy and community among other requirements. The redevelopment plan must designate the use of the building – commercial, industrial, transportation, or a multifamily dwelling, as well as what improvements are needed.

DCED would have 90 days to review an application and grants range from a minimum of \$50,000 to no more than \$500,000 or an amount equal to 30 percent of the project cost, whichever is less. Projects must be completed within two years of receiving the grant, though a six-month extension may be granted. If the project is not completed with this timeframe, DCED may recapture all or a portion of the grant.



### **Just Released: The Local Government Commission's Automated Speed Enforcement Report**

Act 38 of 2023 directed the Local Government Commission to conduct a study on automated speed enforcement, specifically automated speed cameras, to provide background information and recommendations to expand this technology to all of the Commonwealth's municipalities.

The report, officially released last week, provides a review of the state of speed enforcement in the Commonwealth, ASE use in other states, the limited ASE programs currently operating in Pennsylvania, as well as an analysis of ASE, including its criticisms, alternatives and considerations should the General Assembly seek to expand its authorization.



## PHILADELPHIA'S HOUSING CRISIS DEMANDS BOLD ACTION – MAYOR PARKER'S \$2 BILLION H.O.M.E. PLAN DELIVERS

**AUTHORED BY ANGELA D. BROOKS, FAICP, CHIEF HOUSING AND URBAN DEVELOPMENT OFFICER, PHILADELPHIA MAYOR'S OFFICE & IMMEDIATE PAST PRESIDENT OF THE AMERICAN PLANNING ASSOCIATION**

Philadelphia faces a housing emergency. When nearly [30 percent of renters \(PDF\)](#) spend more than half their income just to keep a roof over their heads, and [9 out of 10](#) the lowest-income residents can't afford both rent and other basic necessities, we're well past talking about a housing challenge. We're confronting a full-scale crisis that threatens the economic foundation of our city.

Mayor Cherelle L. Parker recognized this harsh reality during her campaign and made an unprecedented promise to build, preserve or restore [30,000 housing units](#).

That promise has transformed into concrete action through the [Housing Opportunities Made Easy \(H.O.M.E.\) initiative \(PDF\)](#) – a \$2 billion investment in the most ambitious housing plan in modern Philadelphia history.

### The Numbers Don't Lie: Philadelphia's Housing Market is Broken

[The statistics \(PDF\)](#) paint a devastating picture. [For renters \(PDF\)](#), 52 percent are cost-burdened, with 28 percent classified as extremely cost-burdened. But the crisis runs even deeper: according to recent research from the Housing Initiative at Penn [\(PDF\)](#), 70 percent of extremely low-income renters and 63 percent of extremely low-income homeowners spend more than half their income solely on housing costs, leaving virtually nothing for other basic necessities. Among all lower-income renters earning \$35,000 or less, [a staggering 68 percent are extremely cost-burdened, and another 20 percent are cost-burdened](#). This means [88 percent of Philadelphia's most vulnerable residents](#) are drowning in housing costs.



The numbers reveal a stark shortage: Philadelphia faces a deficit of over [64,500 housing units \(PDF\)](#) that are both affordable and available to extremely low-income households, according to Penn researchers. This shortage drives the broader rental crisis across income levels.

Homeownership has become equally elusive. The [median home sale](#) price jumped 37 percent between 2019 and 2024, from \$175,000 to \$240,000. Even more shocking, the cost of the lowest-quartile homes — typically the entry point for first-time buyers — surged 56 percent to \$145,000. [Penn’s analysis \(PDF\)](#) shows that while a household at 30 percent of Area Median Income (AMI) could afford a typical mortgage in 2018, by 2022 buyers needed incomes of 50 percent AMI or above — effectively putting homebuying out of reach for income groups in Philadelphia that have historically owned their own homes. The monthly cost of homeownership has [increased by 61 percent, with down payment requirements up 37 percent](#). What once required \$17,500 downpayment and a \$1,169 monthly mortgage now demands \$24,000 downpayment and

\$1,880 monthly — pricing out entire generations of potential homeowners.

These aren’t just numbers — they represent families forced to choose between housing and healthcare, parents working multiple jobs to afford rent and young adults unable to build wealth through homeownership.

### **H.O.M.E.: A Data-Driven Response to Crisis**

Mayor Parker’s response isn’t based on political rhetoric or wishful thinking. H.O.M.E. relies on a rigorous [housing gap analysis](#) conducted by Moody’s, PolicyMap and Reinvestment Fund’s Policy Solutions group. This analysis identifies where Philadelphia has housing shortages by comparing current vacancy rates to normal market equilibrium rates. When vacancy rates fall below equilibrium, it signals a housing shortage requiring urgent intervention.

The results are revealing while downtown and trendy River Ward areas have housing surpluses — with thousands of new units sitting vacant — vast swaths of Northeast and Northwest Philadelphia face acute

shortages. These underserved areas are home to Philadelphia’s stable Black middle-class communities and growing immigrant working families who have been systematically underserved by private markets.

This geographic precision allows H.O.M.E. to target resources where they’re needed most, rather than subsidizing developments in areas already oversupplied by market forces.

## Unprecedented Financial Commitment Matches the Scale of Crisis

H.O.M.E.’s \$2 billion investment reflects the magnitude of Philadelphia’s housing emergency. The financing structure includes \$800 million in bonds — issued in two strategic \$400 million tranches to maximize investment efficiency — plus \$1 billion in public land contributions. Additional funding streams include federal HUD programs such as the Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) Program, Home Investment Partnerships (HOME) Program, Housing Opportunities for Persons with AIDS (HOPWA), Emergency Solutions Grants Program (ESG), the City’s General Fund and Housing Trust Fund and private investments.

But money alone won’t solve this crisis. Through H.O.M.E., the city is partnering with philanthropic organizations, labor unions and a 50-member Advisory Committee representing every sector of Philadelphia’s housing ecosystem. This collaborative approach ensures that solutions address real community needs rather than top-down mandates.

The plan will create [13,500 new housing units and preserve 16,500 existing units \(PDF\)](#), representing 78 percent of estimated need in both categories. This strategic approach recognizes that preservation is often more cost-effective than new construction while maintaining affordability in established neighborhoods.

## The Preservation Crisis: A Ticking Time Bomb

H.O.M.E.’s focus on preservation addresses another urgent reality: Philadelphia’s housing stock is

deteriorating rapidly. With [64 percent of housing units built before 1960 \(PDF\)](#), the city faces massive repair needs. [Penn researchers \(PDF\)](#) found that over [38 percent of all Philadelphia housing \(PDF\)](#) units need repairs, while more than 14,000 units lack complete kitchen or plumbing facilities. [The lowest-income residents bear the brunt of these conditions \(PDF\)](#), with 33 percent of extremely low-income renters and 20 percent of extremely low-income homeowners living in units with significant maintenance issues, outdated systems or structural deficiencies.

Even more concerning, conventional financing for essential repairs remains largely inaccessible to those who need it most. Only 15 percent of homeowners with incomes below \$25,000 can access repair loans, according to Penn’s analysis, while even homeowners earning over \$100,000 face approval rates of just 50 percent. This financing gap means that without public intervention, housing conditions will continue deteriorating, threatening both habitability and neighborhood stability.

H.O.M.E. doesn’t just build units — it dismantles systemic barriers to housing access. The Philly First Home and Turn the Key programs and the new One Philly Mortgage initiative, modeled after Massachusetts’ successful ONE Mortgage program, provide down payment assistance, reduced PMI requirements, discounted interest rates and comprehensive pre- and post-purchase counseling. These programs enhance “effective demand” by enabling families to compete in markets previously beyond their reach.

The City’s substantial land portfolio becomes a strategic asset under H.O.M.E. Rather than default to selling parcels to the highest bidder, the city will strategically deploy land based on housing gap analysis and market strength assessments. This ensures public resources support developments that serve community needs rather than subsidizing projects that would happen anyway.

Crucially, H.O.M.E. includes critical process reforms to reduce the time and expense associated with housing

development. Through convening internal and external stakeholders, conferring with innovative peer cities and analyzing data, the city has developed more than 100 concrete legislative, regulatory and operational recommendations for reform and is working steadily to bring them to fruition. The recommendations are focused on removing barriers to development and accelerating residential construction and renovation by creating new housing opportunities, streamlining development approvals, increasing accessibility and predictability and improving data quality and transparency.

## **Market-Smart Strategy Maximizes Public Investment**

H.O.M.E. recognizes that \$2 billion, while substantial, must be deployed strategically to achieve maximum impact. The plan avoids the historic mistake of over-subsidizing developments in strong markets that don't need public support. Instead, it matches subsidy levels to actual need, ensuring resources reach developments that desperately require support to achieve affordability targets.

For example, units serving Philadelphia's lowest-income residents require deeper subsidies and different financing tools than workforce housing. By [mapping housing gaps against income demographics](#) at the tract level, H.O.M.E. can precisely target financial tools to maximize unit production across income levels.

## **Transparency and Accountability Drive Implementation**

Mayor Parker has committed to unprecedented transparency in H.O.M.E. implementation. The city is developing public dashboards that will track HOME-funded activities against production targets, displaying progress in accessible map formats that give residents detailed insight into their neighborhoods' housing investments.

This transparency serves dual purposes: enabling meaningful community participation in housing decisions and holding the administration accountable for its ambitious promises. Annual updates to housing gap analysis will provide objective measures of H.O.M.E.'s impact, ensuring course corrections when needed.

## **Bold Leadership for an Urgent Crisis**

Philadelphia's housing crisis demands leadership that matches the scale of the challenge. Mayor Parker's H.O.M.E. initiative represents exactly that — a data-driven, strategically financed and collaboratively implemented response that treats housing as the fundamental necessity it is.

With 30,000 units in the pipeline and \$2 billion committed, H.O.M.E. won't solve Philadelphia's housing crisis overnight. But it represents the kind of bold, sustained commitment necessary to restore housing affordability and accessibility for all Philadelphians. The question isn't whether we can afford this investment — it's whether we can afford not to make it.

The housing emergency is real. The solution is H.O.M.E.

# Public Finance

## LISTENING TO OUR INVESTORS

### HOW SURVEYS KEEP PLGIT RESPONSIVE AND ADAPTABLE

BY COURTNEY MULHOLLAND, DIRECTOR, PFM ASSET MANAGEMENT, A DIVISION OF U.S. BANCORP ASSET MANAGEMENT, INC.

Local Government Investment Pools (LGIPs) like PLGIT provide a valuable vehicle for local governments to collectively invest surplus funds in a way that promotes safety, liquidity, and competitive returns. But simply offering a pool is not enough. For PLGIT to remain effective, responsive, and trusted, we must continually evolve—and one of the most direct and powerful tools for us to do this is by conducting periodic surveys of you — our investors.

Here are a handful of examples of why our survey — and your day-to-day feedback — helps us improve our services and operational framework:

#### **Reinforcing Accountability and Transparency**

PLGIT manages public funds, and as such, we operate under heightened expectations for transparency and fiduciary responsibility. Surveys provide a formal mechanism for you to voice your concerns, ask

questions, and rate aspects of our services. When we request investor feedback and show how we plan to respond, it strengthens trust between PLGIT and the people we serve.

A survey-driven approach complements other reporting best practices. For example, the Government Finance Officers Association (GFOA) recommends that state and local government investment programs determine the market value of all securities in the portfolio at least quarterly and disclose those values to oversight bodies.<sup>1</sup> By layering in investor feedback, we improve our alignment with your expectations.

#### **Aligning Services with Evolving Needs**

Investor priorities shift over time. In certain interest rate environments, investors may emphasize yield; in more volatile periods, safety and liquidity. A survey allows an LGIP to track changes in these priorities

and fine-tune its strategies accordingly.

Our conversion from the Easy Online Network (EON) to Connect a few years ago was largely shaped by what upgrades our investors had been asking for in terms of digital access to account information.

Over time, this responsiveness contributes to higher retention, deeper participation, and stronger peer referrals—especially in a public finance context where reputation matters.

#### **Proactive Detection of Risks and Weaknesses**

Regular polling of investors can uncover small issues before they become larger ones. For example, several investors of an LGIP might subtly express dissatisfaction with customer service response times. Perhaps a different subset of respondents note that cash flows are becoming more unpredictable

<sup>1</sup>Market-to-Market Reporting for Public Investment Portfolios. GFOA.

in their jurisdiction, requiring greater flexibility in withdrawals.

By recognizing these issues early, a LGIP's leadership can respond—reallocating resources to operations, adjusting policies, or re-engineering processes—rather than scrambling to respond after complaints from investors increase, or investors begin to leave the pool. In this way, surveys act as an early warning system, bridging the gap between staff and investors.

## Supporting Strategic Planning and Innovation

A regular survey of investors positions PLGIT to evolve more strategically. Over multiple survey cycles, trends emerge -- areas where satisfaction is consistently weak, or where demand for new features like mobile access or enhanced analytics steadily grows.

That type of data greatly improves our strategic roadmap. It helps identify which innovations will yield the greatest gains in stakeholder value, and assist in setting priorities around staffing, technology investment, policy changes, and communications.

## Strengthening Credibility with Stakeholders and Oversight

PLGIT has a responsibility to satisfy not only its investors but also its external stakeholders:

elected officials, our board, auditors, rating agencies, and the public. The active solicitation of, and response to, investor feedback enhances PLGIT's credibility.

In addition, the GFOA endorses the National Association of State Treasurers (NAST) Guidelines for LGIPs, encouraging pools to adopt strong disclosure and governance practices such as the clear disclosure of investment and administrative policies.<sup>2</sup> By demonstrating PLGIT's responsiveness, we strengthen our standing in the eyes of peer reviewers, oversight bodies, and the public.

## Four Key "Asks" for the PLGIT Survey – and What We Learned

Listening to our stakeholders is an important part of what we do, and a critical guide to how we do it. That's why, in the 4th quarter of last year, we surveyed our investors to ask what you saw as PLGIT's biggest assets, as well as how you felt about our performance.

Here are a few examples of what we asked - and what we learned:

- **Investment Objectives & Risk Tolerance** We asked investors to rank or weigh their priorities (safety, liquidity, yield, flexibility). Understanding shifting preferences allows us to balance our portfolio
- **Operational Responsiveness & Service Quality** We measured satisfaction with customer support, responsiveness of staff, timeliness of transactions (deposits/withdrawals), and overall service reliability.

strategy to best meet investor expectations.

Of the 262 responses we received from this survey, more than 140 respondents told us that yield was either the highest or second highest priority of all of PLGIT's services. It was also the highest level of satisfaction among respondents. Safety was the second overall highest priority and area of satisfaction, and Reporting was the third highest rated area of satisfaction.

- **Communication & Reporting Clarity** We asked for feedback on how clear, accessible, timely, and useful investors found reports, disclosures, dashboards, and commentaries. This ensures that technical information is presented in a "reader-friendly" fashion.

The responses we received showed that investors are largely pleased with the availability of information and records through Connect, as well as the efforts to fine tune the portals functionality and interface.

<sup>2</sup>Endorsement of National Association of State Treasurers' Guidelines for Local Government Investment Pools. GFOA

Respondents had some important suggestions as to what they would like to see in terms of transactions, but ranked overall Convenience and Service Quality as the third highest satisfaction element of the pool. (tied with their satisfaction with reporting.)

- **Technology & Digital Experience** We gauged user satisfaction with data export features, real-time monitoring, Connect, and integration with our investors' internal systems.

As mentioned above, respondents were satisfied with how Connect continues to evolve – most notably, we learned that our investors were pleased with the ease of information and data accessibility.

It would be a mistake to view regular surveys of investor-participants as “extras.” They are critical infrastructure for a modern, well-governed LGIP. Such feedback mechanisms reinforce transparency, align the pool with evolving investor needs, identify risks early, and stabilize external credibility.

By pairing robust survey processes with established practices (such as GFOA-endorsed reporting standards and governance frameworks), PLGIT will continue to evolve

more dynamic, stakeholder-centered products and services – better equipped to serve local governments faithfully and flexibly for years to come.

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