

# Toolkit for Responding to Extremist Disruptions at Public Meetings



**The ADL Center on Extremism is tracking an increase in antisemitic harassment and trolling efforts at public forums such as city and town council meetings. Below are recommended steps that public officials and community members can take in the wake of these alarming trends.**

**\*\*It is imperative that cities, towns, and counties consult with legal counsel to understand the parameters of their state's open public meeting laws, any existing rules that already regulate public comment, and any other relevant state statutory or constitutional parameters, before considering adoption of any of the below recommendations. This toolkit is not intended to and does not provide legal advice or guidance.\*\***

## Town/City Council Members

Governing bodies of cities, towns, and counties have an important interest in ensuring that meetings are conducted in an open, transparent, and equitable way, and in a manner that safeguards the free speech rights of those in attendance, including by preventing and countering threatening, harassing, or violent activities by extremists who may seek to disrupt such meetings.

### Consider Viewpoint Neutral Time, Place and Manner Restrictions

Many city and town councils have adopted formal rules of procedure (sometimes pursuant to or consistent with state open meeting laws) to govern the conduct of their meetings. Review your city or town's existing rules, particularly as they pertain to how members of the public can address the council and share their views.

Because public meetings of such governing bodies are considered "limited public forums," the government can under many circumstances regulate the time, place and manner of speech permitted during such meetings so long as the time/place/manner restriction(s) do not discriminate based on the viewpoint being expressed and are evenly enforced regardless of the viewpoint being expressed.

Below is a non-exhaustive list of certain types of viewpoint-neutral time, place and manner restrictions that could help cities, towns, and counties across the country counter significant disruptions by extremists who seek to threaten, harass or intimidate others during these meetings.

- **Sign-in and Identification Requirements:** Consider procedures that would require individuals to sign a "sign-in sheet" online in advance or in-person at the meeting if they would like to share their views during the public comment portion(s) of the meeting. Each person could also be asked to identify themselves by their name and city of residence at the beginning of their remarks. Establish and communicate a neutral order of speaking (e.g., first, those who registered in advance, then those who signed in to speak, etc.).
- **Time Restrictions:** Consider time limitations for public remarks — for example, 2 or 3 minutes per person, unless a longer period is permitted by the council. Communicate how much total time is allotted for public comment (e.g., 30 minutes) and how much time each individual person can speak (e.g., 3 minutes). Use a timer consistently for every speaker, to ensure equal speaking time.
- **Written Comments:** Encourage members of the public to submit written comments to the council on matters of public interest or concern.

## • **Threatening, Violent, or Intentionally Disruptive**

**Conduct:** Consider rules that would require the removal of any individual who engages in any truly threatening or violent conduct or who, after a clear warning from the chair or other member of the city/town council, continues to engage in other intentionally disruptive conduct that substantially interferes with, or prevents, the conduct of the meeting.

## **Ensure Adequate Preparation for Meetings**

Preparation for council meetings will help the meeting run more smoothly and aid in preventing harassing or violent behavior. As a city or town council, it is important to discuss how you will address hate speech in the moment, and to be prepared to highlight and reaffirm your community's values when biased and hateful speech is expressed. It is also wise to prepare for hot-button issues, especially those that are currently taking place in your community. Familiarize yourself with those issues by building background knowledge and talking with relevant stakeholders. You may also want to review the code phrases, [symbols, and signs](#) of extremist groups if you anticipate extremist activity.

## **Respond in the Moment to Counter the Hate**

Although most hate speech is protected under the First Amendment, with some exceptions (e.g., true threats, incitement to violence), your own words and actions as government leaders can play a critically important role in countering such hate. If, during the meeting, hate speech does take place, it is essential to call it out in the moment — i.e., as soon as that person has concluded their remarks. For example, if someone says something racist or antisemitic, or expresses anti-LGBTQ+ bias, you can say, "Comments like those are deeply problematic and harmful, and wholly inconsistent with our community's values."

One of the most important steps that elected officials and community leaders can take to combat hate is to exercise your own free speech rights to make clear that such rhetoric is unacceptable and antithetical to your community's values of inclusivity and equity. In the event that violent, threatening, harassing or intentionally and

repetitively disruptive behavior does take place during a meeting, make sure that appropriate protocols and procedures are followed before taking steps to remove the individual or group. If at any time you believe that yourself or others are in danger of physical harm, contact law enforcement immediately.

## **Communicate, Heal and Educate**

When hateful language or extremist group activity occurs at a city/town council meeting, there could be residual and long-term impacts. It is important to communicate, heal and learn from the experience. Here are some important steps to take:

Issue a public statement denouncing the hateful language or incident in unequivocal terms. Use as clear, specific and intentional language as possible. To avoid reinforcing the harm that has already been caused, summarize it rather than repeating it verbatim (i.e., do not repeat a racial slur if one was used but do "name the hate" — i.e., call it an antisemitic [or racist, or anti-LGBTQ+, for example] incident if that is what it was). This is another opportunity to re-state your community's values, especially around diversity, equity and inclusion. Use a variety of strategies for communicating (i.e., digital, print, in-person/verbal, etc.).

- Be mindful not to give undue attention to the instigators or extremists. If a hate or extremist group whose goal is publicity is involved, consider ways you can provide important information that will make the community feel knowledgeable without publicly highlighting the particular hate or extremist group.
- Be sensitive to the needs and asks of individuals or identity groups who may have been targeted or negatively impacted during the meeting. Provide time and space to discuss what happened and identify what steps they might recommend. Address individual harm or trauma as necessary.
- Continue to educate the community about the issues that arose from the meeting. This can include both short- and long-term commitments to anti-bias education, educating about extremism, social and emotional learning, or other topics.



# Town/City Community Members

At a time of rising hate and extremism across the country, including at school board and city/town council meetings, it is important that residents and community members show up and make their positive messages of inclusion heard. Consider signing up in advance to testify at your next city or town council meeting. If you hear biased language or themes during the meeting, make sure to counter it in your own remarks. If you cannot attend in person, consider submitting written testimony on topics of concern. If you learn about a hateful incident at a meeting in your city/town, consider writing an op-ed to counter it, or hosting a community forum or gathering to reaffirm your city/town's values.

**ADL is the leading anti-hate organization in the world. Founded in 1913, its timeless mission is “to stop the defamation of the Jewish people and to secure justice and fair treatment to all.” Today, ADL continues to fight all forms of antisemitism and bias, using innovation and partnerships to drive impact. A global leader in combating antisemitism, countering extremism and battling bigotry wherever and whenever it happens, ADL works to protect democracy and ensure a just and inclusive society for all.**





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