

## **Protecting Our Democracy's Frontline Workers**

Statement by Sarah Brown  
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What changes have been made in office policy to improve safety of the workforce?

- Due to the types of threats and the volume of threats that the Secretary and our office received after the 2020 General Election the Arizona Department of Administration (ADOA) - the agency that oversees State facilities and physical security – recommended that the 7<sup>th</sup> floor of the State Executive Tower, where the offices of Secretary of State (SOS) elections, executive, and administrative staff are located, be restricted to just the SOS staff that needed access to the floor for work. Up until that point, all SOS staff had access to the floor and all other state agencies and members of the public (after going through a security checkpoint on the first floor of the building) could access the 7<sup>th</sup> floor lobby. The restrictions went into effect on 12/10/2020. Originally, the plan was to leave the restrictions in place through the Arizona Electoral College ceremony on 12/14/2020 and then through Presidential Inauguration Day on 1/20/21. But, after the January 6<sup>th</sup> attack on the US Capitol, and subsequent protests at the Arizona Capitol, along with continued threats on our office, security concerns only grew and the restrictions on the 7<sup>th</sup> floor were left in place. Then, in the Spring of 2021 the Arizona State Senate ordered a partisan review of the votes cast in Maricopa County, which led to further threats on and security concerns for our office. The 2020 election season kept going and now that we are in the 2022 election cycle we feel it's important to keep the restrictions in place to protect the staff on the floor. Visitors are allowed to come up to the 7<sup>th</sup> floor, after going through security on the 1<sup>st</sup> floor, by getting an escort from someone on our staff. This allows us to keep the floor restricted and screen visitors to ensure that they have a legitimate need for service from the agency before they are allowed up to the offices.
- The volume of calls after the 2020 cycle was like nothing the office had ever experienced before and many calls were threatening and abusive and/or the caller only wanted to complain about the election results or vent about a conspiracy and did not actually need service from the office. As a result, we started sending calls straight to voicemail and developed a system of screening the voicemails to determine if a response was needed. We started taking live calls again this calendar year and have hired temps to help with the phones.
- Our office had implemented an "Extraordinary Communication / Unproductive Communications" policy in early 2019, but after the 2020 election cycle it was clear that a more robust policy was needed as a means to provide additional support to our customer service staff. In 2021 we rolled out a "Dealing with Unacceptable Customer and Constituent Behavior" policy that defines aggressive or abusive behavior, unreasonable demands and/or unreasonably frequent or repetitive contact, and threatening behavior. The policy also outlines procedures for reporting threatening behavior and provides step by step guidance for dealing with each type of behavior, including a breakdown of protocols based on if the interaction is face-to-face, on the phone, over voicemail, or through written communication. While this type of policy is handy for any office that deals with customers, a policy with the level of detail and specific guidance of our new policy was not necessary prior to 2020, based on the types of interactions our office had historically had with customers.

Are there other things you would do If you had sufficient resources?

- Full time security for the lobby of our Elections office - this would mitigate some of our security concerns and open up the possibility of reopening the office to the public. Currently, individual staff escort visitors from the 1<sup>st</sup> floor to the 7<sup>th</sup> floor of our building (where our offices are located), but if there was a security officer on the 7<sup>th</sup> floor we'd be more comfortable with visitors coming right up to the floor and this would also eliminate the need for staff to provide escorts to visitors, which is not an ideal situation to be putting them in. Also, our receptionist sits alone in the 7<sup>th</sup> floor lobby which is a security issue and I'd feel better if a security officer was stationed in the lobby with them.
- We'd have secure parking for 7<sup>th</sup> floor staff or dedicated security escorts available to walk staff to and from our offices. Our building is secure (visitors must go through a security check point that includes metal detectors), but once staff exit the building to go to their cars they are in a public parking area. After a day of taking threatening and abusive phone calls it can feel quite vulnerable to then walk out to your car without some form of protection, particularly because our offices are a part of the Capitol Complex and when there are protests they are often at the Capitol. It's also not unusual for there to be armed protestors right outside of our offices. We can request escorts from Capitol police, but they are assigned to the whole Capitol complex and it would be preferable to have someone assigned just to our office.
- Full time security for the Secretary - the State provided the Secretary with a security detail in December 2020 after numerous direct threats on her life that culminated in armed protestors showing up at her home. The detail was removed after the 2021 presidential inauguration despite ongoing threats. It was temporarily reinstated at the start of the partisan review of Maricopa's ballots, but only for a few weeks. Other statewide elected officials have a full-time detail, including the Governor and Attorney General, but the state has been unwilling to fund a full time detail for the Secretary, despite the fact that she continues to receive threats. People have taken advantage of public events where the Secretary is present and have shown up to confront/threaten her in person, yet the Secretary has had to personally seek out assistance with acquiring security details even for events where she is appearing in her official capacity.
- Social media monitoring services for the office and the Secretary – employing a full-time monitoring service would allow us to track threats and trends, report them to the appropriate authorities, and determine if any further action was needed, such as implementing additional protective measures. It has been made very clear to us that our employees are responsible for monitoring all of our social media channels, phones and email messages by our law enforcement partners, yet they have not provided any training about what is reportable or how to best identify potentially threatening language and content.
- More office space to centralize all election staff and activities, including seasonal staff, to an area that has appropriate physical security in place. Many elections processes require large amounts of materials, time and physical space and our office space is only large enough to accommodate permanent staff and small-scale projects. So, when we have larger scale tasks or events, like petition processing, trainings, or ceremonies we often have to use spaces outside of our main office for staff, materials, and processing. There is a sense that there are those that would like to disrupt election processes and/or harm election workers and it is difficult to reduce the risk of a disruption, or even an attack, when events are outside of a single, secure space.
- More physical security for our main election's office – for example, bullet proof glass in the 7<sup>th</sup> floor lobby, where our receptionist sits alone during office hours.
- More election staff to deal with customer volume so that staff have the time to take breaks from working with customers - this would be a benefit to staff's mental health and help with

retention. Due to the nature of elections work (seasonally long hours and statutory deadlines that require a lot of work to be completed in short spurts of time) it's common for staff to experience burnout, but the level of burnout has really been exacerbated by the frequency of abusive and threatening interactions staff have had with customers. Many staff have expressed that it has affected their mental well-being. Mental health tools and resources for election workers needs to be a focus and a priority moving forward.

- A dedicated "recovery" space for staff to go to reset after dealing with angry/threatening/abusive interactions.
- More pay for staff in general.

What, if any, fallout are you seeing with retention and recruitment?

- Since July 2020 we've lost more of our permanent staff (9) than we've retained (7). Only two employees currently on staff were with the office going back to early 2019. We've lost a lot of institutional knowledge due to the high turnover rates.
- We had to do a re-org in the election division in order to finance raises for the election staff that remained after the 2020 cycle. Otherwise, we likely would not have been able to retain the 7 staff that are still with us.
- Recruiting is far more difficult. Staff are often in distress and it's been difficult to maintain staffing levels because of the stress involved with carrying out the work.

What concerns do you have for the 2022 Midterms and looking forward to 2024?

- Security of staff and the Secretary.
- Lack of access to federal grant funds because of Arizona's requirement that the State legislature appropriate them before our office uses them.
- Lack of access to donations and private grants because our state legislature passed a prohibition on election offices in the State of Arizona accepting those types of funds.
- Our office hasn't received any funding from the State to help us contend with the new and unique issues that Elections offices are facing.