

# Handling Interactions with Angry Citizens<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

We've heard and read a lot recently about rising incivility.<sup>2</sup> One concerning thread of this problem is the increasing frequency with which our members' employees are confronted by angry or menacing citizens. It's always been the case that occasionally, municipal employees must deal with difficult citizens. But our members tell us it's happening more often.

This article is intended to provide managers, supervisors, and employees with tips and approaches for handling difficult citizen interactions, in hopes of achieving an appropriate, safe, and risk-free outcome. Members may also use the self-assessment accompanying this article to help them determine how well their organization is prepared to handle these interactions.

## THE PROBLEM

One of the most stressful things public employees must do is interact with citizens who are angry for some reason. These citizens may be:

- Unhappy with a service your city or town provides;
- Frustrated about delays or "red tape" related to some issue they are facing;
- Unaware of, or disagree with ordinances, rules, or policies your municipality is enforcing; or
- Upset about political issues, whether related to your municipality or under its control—or not.

Often these citizens will be very specific in telling your employees the reason for their anger. That's good! Knowing why someone is upset can help employees address the person's concern appropriately. If employees respond politely and professionally, listen with empathy, and offer solutions, the citizen's frustration can often be eased and the situation resolved.

Angry citizens create several concerns for public entity managers and employees. Organizations may lose credibility with their communities if these contacts are not handled well. Encounters with angry citizens can create stress for employees, which may lead to increased illness or unhappiness. Stress may also lead to declines in attendance and job performance. These consequences affect both employees and employers but can be reduced or prevented if staff are provided with specific tools for interacting successfully with angry citizens. Additionally, from a legal and risk management perspective, employers have an affirmative responsibility to provide employees with a safe workplace. In a worst-case scenario, a failed interaction with an angry citizen can create liability concerns for employers.

## TOWARDS A SOLUTION

Preparation is the key to successful outcomes. Therefore, your entity should be prepared to deal with angry citizens via pre-set policies rather than "on the fly." Management should establish guidelines that help employees identify and handle situations involving angry citizens. These guidelines should discuss how to address immediate circumstances while also building a foundation for better relations with the person in the future.

Employees should be instructed on the extent of their authority to resolve citizen problems so that employees know both when they are empowered to offer solutions within the designated boundaries, and when they are to hand off a situation to a supervisor or other person in the organization. Employees should also receive training on these guidelines. They

should know what the guidelines say, how to put them to use, and the potential consequences for both employees and the entity if they are not followed. We suggest your guidelines and trainings include the following proven techniques.

**Be Friendly Whenever Greeting Citizens.** Employees should always greet members of the public in a friendly manner. A warm welcome shows the employee is kind, which makes it harder for people to be hostile toward them. Angry individuals often do not expect a friendly greeting. An employee's pleasant, courteous introduction can dramatically shift the direction of an entire exchange to a positive outcome because the person now views the employee as someone who will help them. Conversely, a curt or annoyed-sounding greeting can quickly ratchet the visitor's mood from "mildly upset" to "furious."

**Maintain a Professional Demeanor.** Employees should act professionally, even when a citizen is expressing their frustration about a situation as anger directed at the employee. While it is difficult for sure to be the focus of such emotions, the key is for the employee to remember that the citizen is usually upset at the situation, not them, and to maintain civility even in the face of incivility. A positive outcome is much more likely if the employee remains professional and polite. Looking the citizen in the eyes and speaking to them with respect can reduce their anger and help ease their perception of being treated unfairly or wrongly. Likewise, maintaining a pleasant, helpful demeanor and speaking with a neutral tone, low pitch, and moderate speed can help the person calm down. On the other hand, telling someone to "calm down" frequently tends to make them angrier.

**Project Empathy.** Projecting empathy – the ability to understand another person's situation and feelings – shows the angry citizen the employee cares and their concerns are being heard. In many cases, all the person may want is someone to listen with compassion or simply pay attention to them. Even if an employee doesn't feel sympathetic, and even if the employee cannot provide the citizen the outcome they prefer, understanding the person's point of view is important to resolving the encounter. Some nonverbal techniques for conveying empathy are tilting one's head attentively, maintaining eye contact while listening, taking notes, or using facial expressions that communicate sympathy.

**Try Paraphrasing.** One verbal technique for expressing empathy is paraphrasing, which is restating in your own words what the other person just said. Employees can start a paraphrase by saying something like: "Tell me if I understand the situation correctly..." or "So what you are saying is ..." By summarizing the citizen's complaint, the employee demonstrates they have listened attentively and understand the individual's concern. Also, paraphrasing gently encourages the citizen to stop talking and listen to the employee, which can help defuse the situation by breaking the momentum of verbal and emotional escalation. Practice this technique at an appropriate break in the citizen's comments. When any speaker is interrupted, their sense of frustration that the other person isn't listening—and consequently their anger—tends to escalate.

**Use Deflectors.** Occasionally, an employee gets into an argument with an angry citizen. Often this occurs because the employee reacted to things the person said that have nothing to do with their complaint. For example, the citizen may vent their feelings with insults and broad negative comments about the employee or the department. If the employee responds in like manner, it will tend to feed the person's anger. To prevent this, employees should receive training in using deflectors.

A deflector is any technique that helps employees avoid the trap of responding in-kind to the citizen's anger or insulting comments. Typically, it's a quick verbal pivot that redirects the person's attention back to the business objective. For example, if a citizen calls an employee a "jerk," the employee resists the impulse to reply with an insult or irritated tone of voice, and instead gives calm but firm assurance and guidance: "I understand you are upset and I want to help, but I need us to be able to talk politely so we can resolve this situation. One possible solution would be ..." This also communicates that, while the employee is willing to be an ally, a minimum level of politeness is necessary on the citizen's part.

**Suggest a Solution.** Managers and supervisors should instruct employees on the range of options available to them for addressing citizens' concerns. In many cases, staff can provide the individual with an appropriate solution. For example: "I can help you fill out that form right now, or you can take it home and bring it back Monday." In some cases, apologizing and making a commitment to correct the situation is sufficient: "I'm sorry we didn't process your paperwork. We can have it done for you this week."

If the person rejects these propositions, one suggested approach is to follow procedures that take a progressively firmer tone. It is very important for the employee to communicate sincerely, and throughout this process, that they want the best outcome for the citizen.

- The first step is to ask the individual for their help. Many people respond favorably if the employee is polite and expresses a spirit of cooperation: "I'd like to work with you to resolve your concern; will you please help?"
- The employee should then explain a proposed solution, tailoring options to the individual based on the person's situation. The explanation should be specific about the steps involved and clear about what the person would gain by cooperating. People are more likely to agree if they understand the benefits to them. For example: "This solution will resolve your concern and is good for you and for us. I hope you can agree with it."
- If the citizen remains reluctant, the employee can restate their desire to be helpful and give the person a chance to collaborate.
- If the person makes an impossible request, the employee should explain that. For example: "Unfortunately, we are not able to do that. What I'm proposing is the best option that will work for both of us." Employees should also be trained on not "over-promising" either a time-frame or an outcome. Doing so will undoubtedly make future interactions worse and reflect poorly on the organization.
- If the citizen again refuses, explain again the benefit they would gain by agreeing to the proposal – and what they stand to lose by not agreeing. This should never be stated as a threat or punishment. Rather, it is simply that the proposed solution offers a benefit that other options don't. "Sir/ma'am, this is really the only win-win solution."

**Documentation.** Any interaction with an angry citizen that requires management intervention should be documented. The report should include the citizen's name and phone number, a description of the problem, the resolution, and whether the person made overt threats or law enforcement was called.

## **SAFETY FIRST!**

Management should train employees to successfully interact with difficult people. However, employers should also make sure employees understand they will not be able to satisfy every complainant or resolve every situation. Some individuals will be extremely determined to get what they want. Some may be under the influence or suffering a psychological condition, making it particularly difficult to reason with them. Whatever the circumstances, if an employee needs help, they should call for a supervisor. If the person poses an immediate threat, law enforcement should be contacted immediately.

Employees should be instructed to take threats or overt signs of imminent violence seriously and call for help as soon as they occur. Employees should know that they are never expected to handle the situation alone when a citizen is threatening them with physical intimidation or violence. Your entity should have a written workplace violence policy that addresses how to assess the potential for violence and how to contact managers and others for help. Employees should receive periodic training on the policy and your entity's procedures for handling threats. Employees should be advised that they may always choose to retreat from an interaction they perceive as threatening or hostile. Some methods established in advance that can help with safety threats as they unfold include a panic button placed in the areas where potential conflicts are most likely to occur, or code words that won't alarm the citizen but will alert nearby employees to summon assistance.

## **PHYSICAL SECURITY**

Public entities should periodically survey and evaluate their buildings and publicly accessible areas for physical security.<sup>3</sup> If there are areas of the building where the public shouldn't be, then those areas shouldn't be accessible to members of the public; non-public areas should be secured and it's best to have them marked that way—e.g., "employees only." Barriers such as locked doors, high-top counters, and plexiglass windows limit the potential for physical contact and confrontation. Panic alarms, good lighting, and video cameras can be appropriate employee safety enhancements.

In addition to the physical security and training topics discussed above, it would also be prudent for your municipality, no matter how large or small, to conduct active shooter training. Your police or sheriff may already have produced such a program. Refresher training with employees should be done and all new employees should be informed of policy as well.

## **OTHER APPLICATIONS**

The approaches suggested here may be helpful in other contexts. For example, supervisors will find the above de-escalation techniques useful in dealing with angry employees as well. Circumstances such as disciplinary discussions may upset employees, but management can often defuse such situations through calm, responsive interactions, and bring about more positive outcomes than might result if employees feel they are not being heard.

In addition, an encounter with a First Amendment auditor can sometimes be akin to dealing with an angry citizen, with the added dynamic that the First Amendment auditor is filming the encounter. We've written elsewhere about the First Amendment audit phenomenon and techniques your entity can use to deal with aggressive auditors;<sup>4</sup> many of the techniques set out above can also be used during these encounters.

Lastly, in the digital age, it's certainly the case that encounters with angry citizens are not in-person only, and public employees occasionally can be on the receiving end of angry, hostile, or threatening e-mails or other electronic communications. Many of the de-escalation techniques described above can be readily applied here as well. For example, employees should be trained to use written deflectors in communication with angry citizens and not use impulsive or defensive language, or "over-promise" an outcome in an e-mail. As an added technique, if an angry citizen is inundating multiple employees with angry e-mails, supervisors might try designating one person to serve as the "vortex" who will be the citizen's point of contact. Letting the angry citizen know that a designated staff member will handle their concerns can increase their sense of being heard, potentially build rapport and trust, and move matters to a successful outcome. The staff member serving as the "vortex" should be skilled in effective written communications and have the time to promptly and professionally respond to the citizen's e-mails.

## **CONCLUSION**

It is important your employees receive guidelines, training, and support to successfully handle interactions with angry citizens. Your entity should provide employees with tools to use in these encounters, including ways to maintain a friendly, professional demeanor when faced with emotional individuals, listen empathetically, use paraphrasing and deflectors, and offer solutions. While your entity cannot be sure when a potentially difficult encounter with an angry citizen will occur, it can be prepared to steer the encounter to a conflict-free outcome. Hopefully the suggestions provided here will help your entity successfully navigate these situations and help create a safe and business-like atmosphere for all employees.

*If you have questions regarding this article or would like further information on CIRSA resources regarding this topic, contact your CIRSA Risk Control Representative or CIRSA General Counsel Sam Light.*

*Note: As with all issues concerning public relations and employee safety, your entity should seek professional advice and input from its own staff, legal counsel, and consultants who have expertise in the fields of customer relations and security.*

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<sup>1</sup> This article is a revised version of an article originally published by the Michigan Municipal League Liability and Property Pool and the Michigan Municipal League Liability and Property Pool (Michigan Pools), and content herein is republished with permission of the Michigan Pools. CIRSA extends its appreciation to the Michigan Pools for its provision of source material for this article.

<sup>2</sup> For example, according to a 2021 National League of Cities (NLC) survey and report, more than 81% of local government officials surveyed have experienced some form of harassment, threats, or violence while in office. The same report states 87% of local government officials surveyed have observed an increase in such behavior, including a dramatic increase since the beginning of the pandemic.

<sup>3</sup> The CIRSA Risk Control Department has developed facility and workplace self-assessment checklists that members can use to identify safety exposures and safety practices and enhancements, available at this link: <https://www.cirsa.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Facility-Security-Manual-Checklists.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> For CIRSA's most recent suggestions on handling visits from First Amendment auditors, see this CIRSA [Liability Alert](#).

# Risk Control Solutions: Interacting with Angry Citizens Self-Assessment

Interactions with angry citizens create many concerns for employers and their employees. This assessment will help you determine how well prepared your organization is to handle situations involving angry customers.

## DOES YOUR ORGANIZATION:

1. Have an established procedure for dealing with angry customers?

YES  NO  →



2. Provide training to all employees?

YES  NO  →



3. Require that management properly responds to employee successes and failures in dealing with angry customers?

YES  NO  →



4. Have established safety procedures?

YES  NO  →



### The procedure should:

- Define clearly how to attempt to defuse the citizen's anger.
- Establish that your entity and management supports the process.
- State that failing to follow the procedure may result in discipline up to and including discharge.
- Be openly communicated to and understood by employees.
- Establish methods for employees to get help.
- Emphasize that employees can use safety procedures whenever necessary.

### The training program should:

- Define and demonstrate clearly how to attempt to defuse citizens' anger.
- Be mandatory for all employees who have contact with the public.
- State that top management supports the process.
- State that violations of the organization's policy may result in discipline up to and including discharge.
- Establish methods for employees to get help.
- Be clear that an employee can utilize safety procedures at any time necessary.
- Be documented.
- Provide practice using real life situations.

### A comprehensive program should:

- Include proper training for employees.
- Include ways to recognize employee's successes as well as areas for improvement.
- Include an effective corrective action program.

### The procedure should:

- Define clearly how to attempt to defuse the citizen's anger.
- Establish that your entity and management supports the process.
- State that failing to follow the procedure may result in discipline up to and including discharge.
- Be openly communicated to and understood by employees.
- Establish methods for employees to get help.
- Emphasize that employees can use safety procedures whenever necessary.
- Use your local law enforcement agency for assistance and advice.

2. Have other measures in place to deal with angry citizens?

YES

NO



**The training program should:**

- Define and demonstrate clearly how to attempt to defuse citizens' anger.
- Be mandatory for all employees who have contact with the public.
- State that top management supports the process.
- State that violations of the organization's policy may result in discipline up to and including discharge.
- Establish methods for employees to get help.
- Be clear that an employee can utilize safety procedures at any time necessary.
- Be documented.
- Provide practice using real life situations.

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**CONCLUSIONS**

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If you were able to honestly answer "yes" to all five questions and your entity is following most or all of the suggested practices, then your entity has reduced its risk exposure to potential claims that can arise from interactions with angry citizens.

If you are unable to answer "yes" to any one or more of the five questions, your entity may have higher risk exposure to a potential liability or workers' compensation claim arising from an interaction with an angry citizen. Missing components from one or more of the five recommended practices may also indicate a deficiency in your current program. You should take one or more of the following actions:

- Correct any deficiency that may exist;
- As needed, contact your attorney and a specialist in customer relations and security for advice;
- Contact the CIRSA Risk Control Department for additional CIRSA resources related to these topics.

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*NOTE: This document is not intended to be legal advice or implied to identify all exposures related to this issue. Members are encouraged to seek professional advice and input from their own staff, legal counsel, and consultants, who have expertise in the fields of customer relations and security for assistance in addressing these issues.*