CONFRONTING HARM

EXPERIENCES AND STRATEGIES FROM U.S. WOMEN STATE LEGISLATORS ON THE FRONTLINES OF POLITICAL VIOLENCE

Ghosh Innovation Lab

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Authors and Acknowledgments

About the Organization:
Ghosh Innovation Lab is a nonpartisan research and development nonprofit organization that uses innovation, technology and process solutions to significantly reduce barriers faced by legislators so they can run with confidence, serve with support, and stay with hope. For more information please visit www.ghoshinnovationlab.org.

We dedicate this report to Representative Melissa Hortman and her husband Mark Hortman, whose lives were tragically taken on June 14, 2025. They carried a flame of democracy that should never be extinguished.

Foreword

For more than a decade, I have worked to advance women's political representation in America. I have celebrated the historic firsts: the breakthrough governors, the pioneering legislators, the trailblazing local officials who shattered barriers that seemed immovable. But I have also documented a more troubling reality. Women who seek to serve are under attack. The assassination of Representative Melissa Hortman and her husband Mark in June 2025 was not an isolated incident. It was the culmination of escalating violence that has been building for years, dismissed too often as the inevitable rough-and-tumble of modern politics. The threats, harassment, and attacks on women legislators follow a clear pattern. They are deliberate attempts to drive women from office before they can consolidate power.

When I founded RepresentWomen, the goal was straightforward: make American politics look more like America itself. Each year, we track progress through our Gender Parity Index, measuring representation between men and women across all fifty states. This report *"Confronting Harm: Experiences And Strategies From U.S. Women State Legislators On The Frontlines Of Political Violence"* adds another essential dimension to understanding the phenomenon of women's political participation. While our index captures the numerical gains and losses in representation, this work illuminates the lived reality behind those numbers. Safety and representation are inseparable. Democracy fails when participation requires risking your life. The research framework forces an uncomfortable question: why do we define political violence so narrowly? The conventional understanding waits for bloodshed before acknowledging harm. But the continuum of intimidation that drives women from public life begins long before physical assault. The framework challenges us to recognize that waiting for violence to escalate before taking action is itself a form of institutional failure.

Dr. Ghosh and her team have documented the reality behind the headlines. The senator who sleeps with pepper spray within reach. The delegate whose panic button sits blocked behind furniture arranged for protection. The representative who sent her husband away during the worst threats, calculating that at least one parent should survive. These accounts reveal more than individual experiences. They expose the systematic breakdown of basic democratic protections.

But there is hope. This research reveals something remarkable. Women legislators are not simply enduring these attacks. They are responding with ingenuity and collective action that may well transform how politics operates. The informal networks, the safety protocols, the encrypted communications sharing threat intelligence in real time represent more than survival tactics. They are the seeds of institutional change. The research preserves lessons that should not have to be learned again. Future candidates will inherit safety practices built through trial and terrible error. Organizations supporting women in politics now have evidence-based guidance on what works and what fails. Most importantly, the conversation shifts from asking women to be tougher to demanding that institutions be better. At a moment when democratic norms face unprecedented strain and women's rights are under direct assault, we cannot afford to lose women leaders to intimidation or workplace bullying. Every woman who stays in the fight keeps the door open. Every woman who leaves sends a message about what we will tolerate.

The next generation is watching. Our response will determine what kind of democracy we leave them.

Cynthia Richie Terrell
Founder and Director of RepresentWomen

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Executive Summary

Background and Urgency

The brutal assassination of Rep. Melissa Hortman and her husband Mark Hortman on June 14, 2025, exposed a crisis that has been building for years: women state legislators face systematic harassment, threats, and violence that compromise their safety, well-being, and democratic participation. This politically motivated killing serves as a stark reminder that threats against elected officials can escalate with little warning, forcing an uncomfortable question: How prepared are any of us, really?

Research Overview

This mixed-methods study examined the safety experiences of women state legislators through:

- **Sixty in-depth interviews** with 38 current and former women state legislators, two staff, and 20 experts
- **Geographic representation** for interviews from 25 states spanning diverse political contexts
- **Three hundred and nineteen responses** to a national survey from women state legislators across all states
- **Demographic diversity** with 27.6% of survey respondents identifying as women of color, closely reflecting the 30.5% national proportion

Key Findings

The Scope of Harm

The report argues for expanding analysis beyond traditional "political violence" definitions to encompass the full spectrum of harms affecting legislators. Women legislators face a comprehensive spectrum of threats that extends far beyond conventional categories of political violence. This broader framework reveals how systematic patterns of harassment achieve the same goal as direct violence: driving women from office and deterring future candidates. This expanded analysis identifies 12 distinct categories of harm, with the following four uniquely affecting women:

- **Misogynistic attacks** targeting competence, appearance, and authority
- **Amplified threats for women of color** combining racial and sexual harassment
- **Systematic appropriation** of women's legislative contributions by male colleagues
- **Institutional dismissal** of women's safety concerns as overreactions

Institutional Failures
State capitols and law enforcement agencies systematically fail to protect women legislators:

- **Inadequate security infrastructure**: Many capitols lack metal detectors, have minimal police presence, and permit concealed carry
- **Ineffective safety protocols**: Emergency procedures are often unknown, untested, or dysfunctional
- **Unreliable law enforcement**: Police responses vary based on political considerations, with some officers actively retaliating against legislators who challenge law enforcement interests
- **Legal system limitations**: Courts consistently protect harassers under First Amendment grounds, with defendants successfully using "blowing off steam" defenses even for death threats

The Devastating Toll
The impact extends across all dimensions of well-being:

- **Psychological harm**: Chronic anxiety, hypervigilance, sleep disruption, isolation and in extreme cases, suicidal ideation
- **Professional constraints**: Safety concerns limit policy advocacy, reduce public engagement, and create impossible

choices between family protection and legislative effectiveness
- **Family impact**: Spouses and children become targets, forcing painful decisions about proximity and protection
- **Staff consequences**: Harassment extends to staff members who serve as buffers, creating a climate of fear that compromises workplace safety

Strategies for Resilience

Faced with inadequate institutional support, women state legislators have constructed sophisticated adaptive strategies organized into three categories that constitute our resilience framework.

Proactive Strategies

- **Mental preparation**: Developing hypervigilance and tactical awareness
- **Physical tools**: Carrying protective devices and modifying clothing for mobility
- **Network building**: Establishing relationships with law enforcement and peer support systems
- **Family protection**: Installing security systems and restricting digital exposure

Responsive Strategies

- **Threat assessment**: Learning to distinguish between manageable harassment and reportable threats

- **Documentation**: Building systematic records for potential legal action
- **Strategic escalation**: Knowing when and how to engage formal security channels
- **Peer consultation**: Accessing expertise through trusted networks

Restorative Strategies

- **Support networks**: Cultivating "nurturing circles" of trusted allies
- **Reset practices**: Understanding personal recovery needs and implementing restoration routines
- **Purpose grounding**: Returning to core motivations for public service
- **Strategic exit**: Recognizing when self-preservation requires leaving office

Guiding Principles for Moving Forward

The research culminates in four core recommendations using the SAFE resilience framework:

➢ **S**ow the seeds for policy change

➢ **A**ccess available resources

➢ **F**ind comfort in community

➢ **E**xplore alternative options

Safety should not be the exception. It should be the expectation.

Overview of Methods

This mixed methods report draws on three data sets: 1) in-depth interviews with 60 key stakeholders, including 38 current and former US women state legislators, two legislative staff members, and 20 experts from safety and security organizations, women's political advocacy groups, and research institutions; 2) a two-wave national survey totaling 319 responses from women legislators; and 3) insights from existing scholarship on gender-based political violence. We focus on state legislators because state governments wield decisive influence over the policies that shape daily life in the United States, yet the distinct and often isolating safety experiences of women in these roles risk being flattened when folded into broader datasets about elected officials that lack this level of nuance and texture. The qualitative component consisted of semi-structured virtual interviews with 38 current and former women state legislators (7 Senators, 29 Representatives including Assemblymembers and Delegates, and two former state legislators) representing diverse geographic regions, political affiliations, and levels of government.

Additionally, two staff members provided institutional perspectives, while 20 subject matter experts offered specialized knowledge on safety trends and best practices. While we did reach out to all state legislators who openly identified as non-binary seeking their unique safety experiences and feedback, we did not receive any survey responses or complete any interviews with non-binary state level elected officials. As a result, we will be using language and data reflective only of cisgender women state legislators in this report. We recognize, however, that LGBTQ+-identified state electeds may experience the same, compounded, and/or unique safety issues and needs related to how their gender or sexuality is perceived in ways not discussed in this report.

The legislators interviewed represented 25 states: California, Colorado, Connecticut, Florida, Idaho, Indiana, Kansas, Louisiana, Maryland, Michigan, Minnesota, Montana, North Carolina, North Dakota, New Hampshire, New Jersey, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Virginia, Vermont, Washington, Wisconsin, and West Virginia. For confidentiality in presenting qualitative findings, we chose to regionalize legislators rather than identify them by state whenever their comments could be sensitive or potentially revealing.

We gathered the quantitative surveys in two trenches between 2023 and 2025. Survey invitations were sent in four waves to all women legislators across the country. We made a conscious choice to keep all legislators anonymous in the survey. The first wave (n=192) was gathered pre-2024 elections and focused on incident reporting, definitions, and frequency of harassment and threats, with representation from all 50 states. Of these respondents, 44 identified as women of color, 144 as not women of color, and 4 preferred not to say. The second wave (n=127) was gathered after the 2024 elections and concentrated on safety needs, resource gaps, and safety perceptions, drawing responses from 47 states. Of these respondents, 44 identified as women of color or mixed race, 79 as not women of color, and 4 preferred not to say or identified otherwise.

Across both waves, 88 out of 319 total survey respondents (27.6 percent) identified as women of color. Of the 2,476 women currently serving in state legislative office nationwide, 1,721 identify as white, meaning women of color comprise 30.5 percent of all women state legislators. The demographic composition of survey respondents approximated the national distribution of women legislators. Given this close reflection, we made the methodological choice not to weight or extrapolate the survey responses.

While there may be some overlap in survey respondents across the two waves of surveys, given how busy legislators are, it would be safe to assume that the overlap is very small. However, it is difficult to determine the exact extent of overlap because both waves of surveys were anonymous.

Lastly, though the list of women legislators we interviewed will not be available publicly due to the sensitive nature of that information and the continuously evolving hostility across the nation, the list of experts will be available in the references section.

Introduction

The Urgency of Confronting Harm

The brutal assassination of Rep. Melissa Hortman and her husband Mark Hortman at their home outside St. Paul, Minnesota during the early morning hours of June 14, 2025 rocked the foundations undergirding many legislators' sense that political violence in the United States is a rare and largely preventable occurrence.

This politically motivated killing is a stark reminder that threats to legislator safety can escalate dramatically with little to no warning, and amid growing hostility towards elected officials, women and women of color in particular cannot easily dismiss this event as an outlier. It forces the uncomfortable realization: How prepared are any of us, really?

"A pretend police officer would easily get me to open the door, and I wasn't locking my doors, even though I live alone as an empty nester," confessed a legislator from Connecticut. "We had a great training session from the CT General Assembly and I wasn't following a single one of the guidelines, truth be told. I've been very trusting and realize I need to pay attention," she added.

The Hortmans' deaths didn't create this crisis– it exposed it. The fundamental problems facing women legislators have been building for years, and her assassination stripped away any remaining illusions about women's safety in public office.

The introduction to this report originally sounded very different. It was going to broadly characterize the unsafe atmosphere in our country: the growing concerns over extreme political hostility, war, the aftermath of COVID-19, and federal changes trickling down to state level discomfort. It was going to discuss how social media has enabled "keyboard warriors," the advancement of technology to disseminate deepfakes for misinformation, and the media's role in amplifying all of this. It was going to catalog the various systemic forces that make the United States a dangerous place to be a woman state legislator.

That project had to be put on hold. Instead, we have decided to prioritize the concrete experiences of women legislators, the unmet needs they have for securing a sense of safety, and pragmatic recommendations for acting under circumstances where they cannot entirely rely on institutions to protect their well-being.

Beyond Political Violence

This sobering moment invites us to reconsider the role that political violence plays in how we talk about safety and address harm to legislators. We propose that "political violence," at least as it is commonly characterized, is a myopic lens through which to look at harm. Much work involving political violence relies upon some variation of the World Health Organization's (WHO) definition of violence as "[t]he intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation."[1] More recent understandings recognize the heterogeneity of political violence and advance more nuanced articulations, but still tend to focus largely on organized and higher-level phenomena) and include political motivation as a necessary condition.[2] We do not disagree with these definitions, but instead wish to expand the range of relevant phenomena when addressing legislator safety.

We do this for several reasons: firstly, *physical force* is only one among many causes of harm to legislators, and *power* is either too broad (anything that *isn't* physical force) to be useful, or too narrow (employing a *power relationship* to influence behavior), since people with no recognizable power relationship are perfectly

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[1] Krug, Etienne G., James A. Mercy, Linda L. Dahlberg, and Anthony B. Zwi. "The World Report on Violence and Health." *The Lancet* 360, no. 9339 (2002): 1083–1088.
[2] Bosi, Lorenzo, and Stefan Malthaner. "Political Violence." In *The Oxford Handbook of Social Movements*, edited by Donatella della Porta and Mario Diani, 440–451. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.

capable of causing plenty of harm. Secondly, undue harm to legislators that is caused by other people may not be intentional, but still very much relevant to their safety, and there may also be relevant harms for which attributions of responsibility are not individual, but institutional or systemic. Thirdly, even when the bar for proving intent is lowered, attention still centers on the actions or their political impact, while the victims' experiences are forgotten. Finally, the term 'incident' carries enough weight that its use is often reserved for egregious acts and grievous injury, passing over 'minor' incidents and the cumulative effects of day-to-day harms.

We suggest that another framework is needed to properly address concerns legislators have about their safety, one that captures the full spectrum of harms they endure. We have developed such a framework for this report, briefly summarized here with a few key definitions.[3] Our framework is grounded upon a robust notion of *well-being*, referring to a multidimensional and comprehensive understanding of a person's overall condition. *Harm* is the negative influence of actions, events, and circumstances on one or more dimensions of a person's well-being. *Safety* is the extent to which a person's future well-being is secured against harm, while *perceived safety* is a person's confidence that they will not be harmed enough in the foreseeable future to significantly reduce their well-being. When that confidence is compromised and a person feels that their well-being may suffer unacceptable reduction due to harm–they experience a *perceived lack of safety*. The distinction between safety and perceived safety is subtle, but important, since a person could be objectively unlikely to be harmed, and yet continue to fear for their well-being.

The well-being framework, while still accommodating phenomena that would qualify as political violence, also considers the consequences of accrued harm that need not be intentional. We put a special focus on one such outcome: departure from public office. Owing in no small part to the fact that governance in the US was originally crafted by and for men, women legislators continue to be treated as perpetual outsiders. The constant harms they face eventually leads some

women to decide not to seek another term in office or pursue further political ambitions. Women leave their positions as state legislators for many reasons, some of them entirely innocuous and routine. But if even *some* departures stem from a perceived lack of safety, we have a problem. To solve that problem, we need to understand the factors that influence their decision to leave.

If we *only* considered the effects of political violence, we'd struggle to sufficiently explain cases where legislators did not believe that they were likely to be the target of an actual attack. While political violence is sometimes–even often– to blame, consistent, unaddressed harms can achieve the same outcome. One plausible way in which this happens is not as an alternative path to exiting for safety reasons (that is, *either* women suffer actual attacks *or* they leave due to more subtle pressures over time), but rather as an interaction between ongoing incremental harms, occasional serious incidents, and awareness of attacks on other women. This framework helps to explain how political violence succeeds at pushing women to leave office, even when actual attacks are relatively rare: experiences of ongoing non-violent harm may amplify the detrimental effect that serious (but non-violent) experiences of harassment or being made aware of actual violence against women politicians have on perceived safety.

Similarly, a lack of perceived safety likely has secondary consequences for women who *aspire* to candidacy. The path to elected office is pre-empted for many as they assess the current state of politics in the US and learn about the harsh realities of being a woman state legislator. Therefore, it is important to consider the current political climate and how it relates to perceptions of safety, not only for legislators themselves, but also for women considering running for office in the future.

What We Know so Far and What We Need to Learn

As of this moment, politics in the United States is deeply polarized. Fewer than half of Americans report that there is common ground between Republican and Democratic representatives in Washington, a trend which has worsened over the

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[3] A full explanation of our well-being framework is available in the Appendix section.

last several years[4]. Fear and distrust of democratic institutions is rising: as of Spring 2025, 62% of Americans reported dissatisfaction with democracy.[5] There are also increasing concerns about political violence against politicians, with nearly two-thirds of Americans saying it is a major problem.[6] A spate of recent instances of political violence led up to Melissa Hortman's murder, including the plot to kidnap governor Gretchen Whitmer in 2020, the Capitol insurrection of January 6th, 2021, and the attack on Nancy Pelosi's husband in their home in 2022. It is clear that patterns of violence against legislators and their families is not just a matter of perception, but representative of real and present danger.

In recognition of this problem, organizations have responded in several ways. New York University's (NYU) Brennan Center for Justice has done extensive research on the abuses suffered by legislators.[7] Princeton University's Bridging Divides Initiative (BDI) has developed a number of resources for modeling and mapping threats against legislators,[8] with an important focus not just on threats at the national level, but also the kinds of abuses and harassment regularly suffered by local officials.

Research from a joint initiative by BDI and CivicPulse shows that about 1% of local

elected officials suffer physical attacks, and 15% were on the receiving end of targeted threats in 2025.[9] Harassment is even more widespread, with 32% experiencing harassment and nearly half reported being insulted, indicating that there is a significant amount of vitriol aimed at legislators that does not constitute physical violence or credible threats. This leaves significant room for understanding how experiences that fall below the threshold definition of violence, at least as traditionally understood, still affect lawmakers and detract from their sense of safety.

Report Summary and Objective

This report is different from previous efforts to chronicle and address the safety needs and experiences of state legislators in a few key ways. The first is that we begin by specifying what it is exactly that violence, harassment, and abuse take legislators *away* from; that is, we start with the idea that each legislator has a baseline level of well-being that they should be able to maintain. We also broaden our understanding of the harms legislators face, recognizing the more extreme threats up to and including actual physical violence but also the accumulated toll that frequent aversive interactions with the public, strife among lawmakers in the statehouse, and frustration with institutional barriers takes on their well-being. Third, we define safety as future-oriented but present-felt, which is to say that safety is about the likelihood that a baseline level of well-being can be maintained over time. Conversely, a lack of safety is felt when a legislator is seriously concerned about the prospects for their future well-being.

This approach allows us to think about much more than preventing threats to legislators, bringing in a myriad of responses and restorative practices that are equally important in addressing the problem of legislator safety. It gives us ample opportunities to forefront the experiences of women state legislators without limiting our attention to elements of their reports relevant to their physical security. When the full spectrum of

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[4] Daniller, Andrew. "Americans See Little Bipartisan Common Ground, but More on Foreign Policy than on Abortion, Guns." *Pew Research Center*, June 25, 2024. https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/06/25/americans-see-little-bipartisan-common-ground-but-more-on-foreign-policy-than-on-abortion-guns/.
[5] Wike, Richard, Janell Fetterolf, and Julie Schulman. "Dissatisfaction with Democracy Remains Widespread in Many Nations." *Pew Research Center*, June 30, 2025. https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2025/06/30/dissatisfaction-with-democracy-remains-widespread-in-many-nations
[6] Pew Research Center. "Voters' Feelings about the 2024 Campaign and Election Outcomes; Concerns about Political Violence." Pew Research Center, October 10, 2024. https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2024/10/10/voters-feelings-about-the-2024-campaign-and-election-outcomes-concerns-about-political-violence/.
[7] Gitanjali Ramachandran et al., *Intimidation of State and Local Officeholders: The Threat to Democracy*, Research Report, Brennan Center for Justice at New York University School of Law, January 25, 2024, https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/intimidation-state-and-local-officeholders.
[8] Bridging Divides Initiative, "Building and Modeling Structures for Early Warning," Princeton University, https://bridgingdivides.princeton.edu/research/early-warning-system.

[9] Bridging Divides Initiative, "Survey of Local Elected Officials on Threats and Harassment: Q1 2025," Princeton University, June 26, 2025, https://bridgingdivides.princeton.edu/updates/2025/survey-local-elected-officials-threats-and-harassment-q1-2025.

harms are considered, we also learn that constituents are not the only source of aggression toward legislators: institutional actors and other legislators are also perpetrators of harassment. Finally, our approach broadens the scope of organizations we could talk to that do work relevant to legislator safety, including those that focus on facilitating healthy interactions with the public. With these advantages in mind, we have collected and summarized a number of personal strategies and organizational support offerings that are key to improving legislator's perception of safety. These differ from, for example, policy recommendations which, while of great importance, do not always provide actionable guidance for legislators themselves, and may only address their actual physical security, overlooking the fears and apprehensions that persist all the same.

This report centers and uplifts the voices of women legislators who have experienced harm. We highlight their accounts, not just to understand what they go through, but to learn what their needs are and provide practical guidance based on what has worked for them thus far. This report is first and foremost for these current and future public servants. It is a roadmap to reclaiming well-being, organized into three essential parts: Chapter One -

The Causes of Harm surveys the landscape of the present state of affairs and describes specific incidents women legislators face; Chapter Two - The Toll, explores how these experiences impact well-being, both immediately and in the long term; and Chapter Three - The Path to Well-Being, offers strategies that fellow legislators are using, outlines available resources provided by organizations, and presents our guiding principles for moving forward. Chapters One and Two offer detailed summaries and analysis of interview and survey data. For those looking for concrete strategies and recommendations, we suggest turning to Chapter Three. Finally, we implore legislators reading this report to think of this as a journey from understanding your reality to transforming it, one that we hope they will take alongside supportive peers.

We began this introduction with a tragic case, one that leaves us wondering: Could our institutions have protected Melissa Hortman? Could her story have ended differently? Answers to these questions may never come. Instead, we must confront an immediate truth: waiting for institutional solutions while women legislators suffer daily harm is not just inadequate, it's unacceptable. What follows is our intervention.

Chapter 1: The Causes of Harm

This chapter draws upon interviews we conducted with 38 women state legislators, as well as the results of a two-wave survey (1st wave n = 192, 2nd wave n = 127), also exclusively for women state legislators. Both methods included questions about their perceptions of the current political environment with respect to legislator safety and their experiences working as a woman in elected public office. They were also asked about the kinds of harmful incidents that they had experienced, expanding upon the nature of these incidents where they felt comfortable doing so.

We begin by outlining the background situation for women state legislators, identifying six salient themes that emerged through qualitative analysis. For each theme, we provide some of the stories they shared with us to illustrate the general pressures and frustrations they face in their role as they relate to their sense of safety and well-being.

Then, we summarize the particular incidents they had personally experienced by grouping them as distinct "types" of events that they characterized as harmful to one or more dimensions of their well-being.

I.   The Situation

a.   Navigating a Growing Climate of Fear and Intimidation

Recent political developments have altered the safety environment for women legislators, with our conversations revealing increased concerns about personal security that extend beyond traditional political disagreement. Our research identified several factors contributing to this shift: heightened political polarization, changes in public discourse, and the intersection of national and state-level political tensions.

Legislators expressed growing concerns about workplace violence, with several drawing connections to broader patterns of violence in American society. A West Coast senator reflected on the potential for legislative environments to mirror other workplace violence scenarios: "Look at the mass shootings. It's workplace violence by disgruntled individuals." Her observation captures a fear shared by others that the current political climate may increase risks of violence from individuals who view elected officials as adversaries.

Multiple legislators described perceiving threats from people who may view their legislative actions through a moral lens. A Southeast representative explained her concern: "They're convinced that what we do is bad or wrong, and I worry that if somebody got the idea that doing something to one of us would actually be doing something good." She also shared how recent high-profile incidents of violence have made these abstract fears more concrete: "That fear became real for me after that CEO was killed" referring to the murder of United Healthcare Chief Executive Officer (CEO) in December 2024.

Legislators from different backgrounds described experiencing targeted harassment related to their identities, particularly around contentious foreign policy issues. A Midwest representative who is Jewish, one of two Jewish legislators in her state, reflected on a shift in her experience: "This is new to me as a Jewish woman in office. I'm feeling a different sense than I had in the past." While she doesn't believe she faces immediate risk, she acknowledged that "the elevation of antisemitic incidents, fairly high profile ones, certainly makes me feel nervous."

Similarly, Arab and Muslim legislators have faced increased targeting and threats, particularly related to their positions on Middle East policy and civil rights issues. The heightened tensions around international conflicts have created an environment where legislators from these communities experience harassment that extends beyond typical political disagreement.

Some legislators have encountered demonstrations that they perceived as personally threatening. A Mountain West senator described protests at the state capitol related to US policy in Gaza that she felt targeted her identity: "There have been recent protests at the Capitol that have been against Jewish people, and I'm a Jewish person. So that felt scary." However, these same demonstrations may be viewed differently by other

Where Legislators Feel Safe and Where They Don't

Safety is uneven across environments and states. Public events and online spaces consistently emerge as the least safe for women legislators.

Overall Perceptions Of Safety
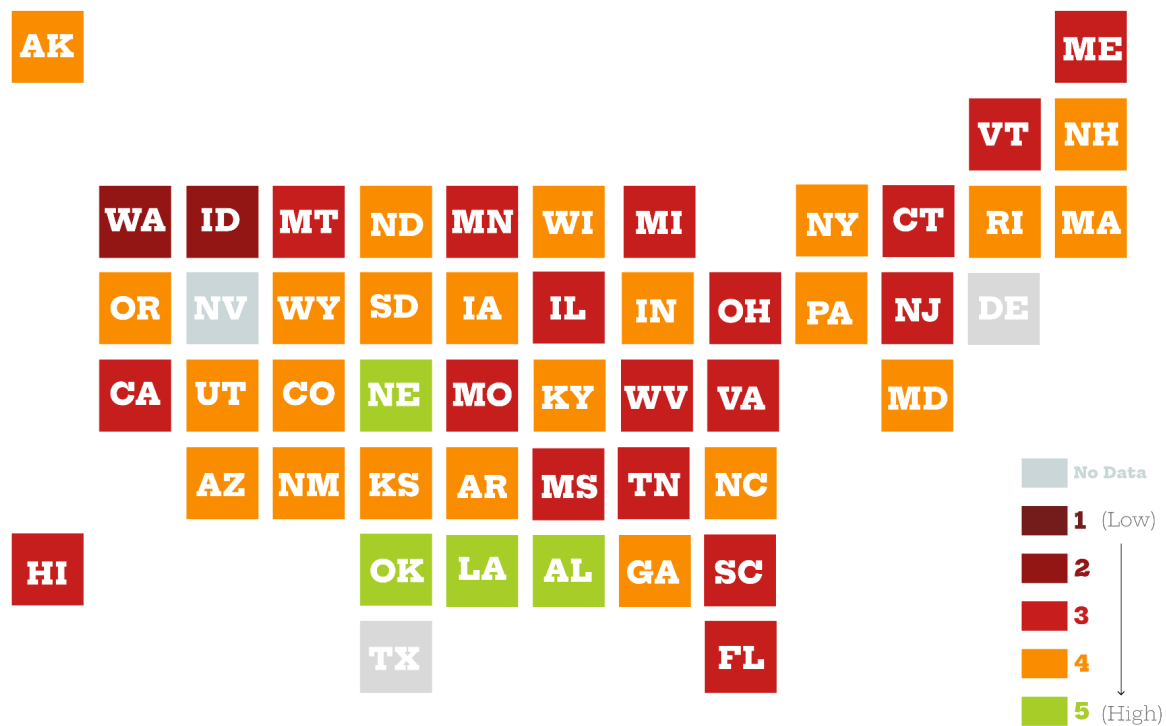
n= 127

Figure 1: Safety ratings in different environments.

legislators, including Palestinian American representatives who see such protests as legitimate political expression on foreign policy issues. These differing perspectives highlight how the same events can be experienced as threatening by some while being seen as protected political speech by others.

Legislators also identified connections between national political rhetoric and their local threat environments. The Southeast representative explained how federal-level discourse influences what she experiences at the state level: "Because of what's happening at the federal level overall, things have not gotten better. There's just the

sentiment in the country that if you support certain communities, if you don't agree with removing people without due process, then they think that you want criminals running around."
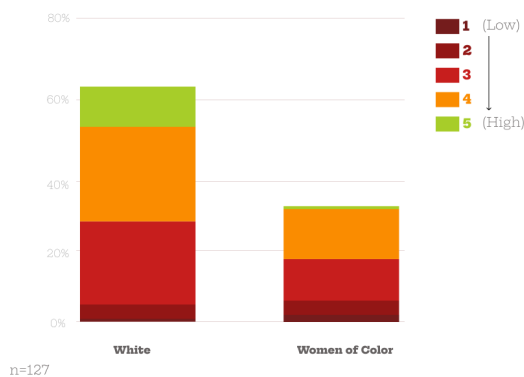
Overall Safety Ratings by Race

Figure 2: Overall perceptions of safety by race.

This rhetoric appears to create conditions where legislators find themselves characterized in ways that justify hostility toward them. As the Southeast representative noted, being portrayed as supporting criminal activity "puts even more danger on you, especially when you're a woman legislator, because you're already a target." Her observation suggests that gender functions as an additional risk factor in the current political environment, compounded by how legislators' identities and policy positions intersect with broader social and international tensions.

b. Women Perceive Misogyny That Male Colleagues Don't Recognize

Our research identified systematic patterns of misogyny that affect women legislators' professional effectiveness and workplace experiences. These patterns include challenges to authority, appropriation of legislative contributions, and differential treatment that appears to be largely unrecognized by male colleagues.

Women legislators reported frequent instances of legislative idea appropriation that reflect misogynistic assumptions about women's intellectual capabilities. A West representative described how "if I were a man, and particularly a

white man, my legislation would be passed," explaining that she experienced mockery for legislation in her first session, only to see male legislators from the opposing party introduce identical measures in subsequent sessions. This pattern suggests systematic devaluation of women's policy contributions based on misogynistic beliefs rather than merit assessment.

Perceptions Of Disproportionate Harassment

Most women legislators say they experience more harassment than men.
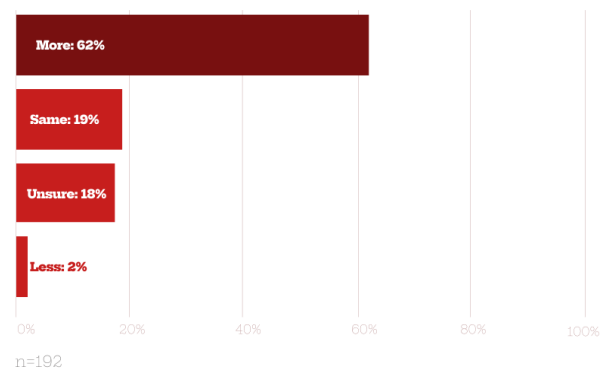
Figure 3: Perceptions of disproportionate harassment.

Authority challenges emerged as another manifestation of institutional misogyny. Women with substantial legislative experience reported having their expertise questioned or bypassed in ways that appeared rooted in misogynistic assumptions about women's competence. A Midwest representative with seven years of legislative experience described interactions where a male colleague seeking her support "was referencing Jonathan [her male staffer] for the answers and solutions" despite her seniority and expertise. Her staffer was forced to repeatedly clarify, "It's up to her, not me."

These misogynistic dynamics create what several legislators characterized as contradictory expectations for women legislators. As the Midwest representative explained: "If I do anything, I'm a one-man show. If I don't do anything, what have I done for Pontiac?" When she articulates her accomplishments, she is "bragging," but when others appropriate credit for her work, she is left wondering "what have you done?" This suggests that misogynistic attitudes

create differential standards for evaluating men's and women's legislative performance.

Fundraising disparities provide quantitative evidence of misogynistic bias in political support systems. The West Coast representative reported having "three times the number of donors that he had, but he had twice as much money as I did because you're a man. You're a white man. People automatically just assume you're gonna go there and get the job done. And I'm a woman, and I have to prove myself time and time again." Data supports this testimony: NPR found a significant fundraising gap for Democratic women candidates compared to their male colleagues.[10]

Institutional culture emerged as a significant factor perpetuating misogynistic practices. Multiple legislators described legislative environments as maintaining patriarchal power structures where misogynistic treatment appears normalized. As a Southern representative observed, legislative bodies remain "very much like a good old boy system" where these systems remain largely unchanged, suggesting that numerical representation alone may be insufficient to counter institutional misogyny.

The research identified escalation patterns reflecting misogynistic targeting when women legislators challenge expectations or oppose certain interests. One Midwest representative reported being "persecuted the whole entire time" during her committee chair tenure because she refused to support legislation she believed would harm vulnerable populations. The harassment was relentless as opponents "surrounded the Capitol many times and just taunted and chased and harassed" her. When she was replaced as chair by a white man, there was "not one incident from this particular group attacking this new person."

Harassment patterns also revealed misogynistic targeting strategies. A Midwestern assemblywoman described how when a woman state legislator left office, "rather than harassing the male senator that took over her seat, they turned and focused on me. I suddenly got a lot more harassment and I noticed some of the names,

and there were people that would harass her." The content of attacks reflected misogynistic stereotypes, with women facing appearance-based harassment like being told "she looks like a clown. She looks like a pig wearing lipstick" and competency-based attacks, being called "a nitwit."

A significant finding involves the perceived awareness gap between women's experiences of misogyny and male colleagues' recognition of these patterns. When a re Western representative shared her constant threat assessment practices with her male legislative partner, "he was shocked by that. He's like, 'What do you mean? You think about that?'."

Multiple legislators noted that male colleagues who obviously had not directly experienced misogynistic targeting tended to minimize these concerns. As the Southern representative observed, "If you're not the target of something, you don't understand what it's like. If you're not the target of gendered violence or gendered threats, then you maybe say, 'Well, it's really not that big of a deal'.'"

c. For Women of Color, Misogyny Is Amplified by Racism

Women of color in state legislatures face a uniquely harsh intersection of racism and sexism that significantly amplifies the threats and harassment they experience. Our research identified patterns of attack that transcend what their white female colleagues face, targeting not just political positions but physical characteristics, racial identity, and fundamental humanity.

The explicitly racialized nature of threats against women of color emerged as a distinct pattern in our interviews. A Midwest representative described receiving death threats that included racial slurs and attacks on her physical appearance: "I got letters saying that they were going to kill me and my husband, with all those other words like the N-word and 'big lip.' They're actually going after our physical characteristics which we can't hide." She noted the inescapable nature of this targeting: "When I walk in the room, everybody knows I'm African American."

Different communities of women of color

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[10] Peter Overby, "There's a $500,000 Gender Gap When It Comes to Campaign Fundraising," *NPR*, September 26, 2018, https://www.npr.org/2018/09/26/651185105/theres-a-500-000-gender-gap-when-it-comes-to-campaign-fundraising.

reported experiencing distinct forms of racialized harassment. A South delegate noted the specific nature of threats she receives as an Asian American woman: "There's a difference in the kind of threats that I get and the kind of threats my female colleagues get, and I think a lot of that has to do with my identity as being an Asian American woman, and the way that our bodies and who we are get objectified and sexualized and fetishized."

The sexualization extends even to seemingly supportive communications. A West legislator described how compliments often contain inappropriate elements: "I had this guy saying he liked my policies but also added 'Why don't you wear some short skirts sometimes so we can see your sexy legs.'"

Media representation compounds these challenges by creating harmful stereotypes that follow women of color into the legislative arena. The Midwest representative recounted an encounter that illustrates this dynamic: "I actually had a conversation with a woman from Africa. She asked me, 'Aren't you a prostitute?' When I asked why, she said, 'Because I see on TV that all Black women are prostitutes.'" These media-driven perceptions create additional barriers within the legislative process itself, as the same representative explained: "Even though I'm pretty intelligent and have a Master's degree, most of them still think I'm illiterate and can't function."

The targeting appears systematic rather than random. A West Coast senator shared how a local reporter revealed the scope of right-wing media attention: "Last year I had a local reporter call me and say, 'We've been taking a look at right wing media and the politician they talk about the most in Washington is you, not the Attorney General.' When asked why, the journalist responded, 'Because you're a woman and a woman of color.'"

Legislators also reported evolution in the nature of threats over time. Another West Coast representative observed: "The threats that I used to face were more innuendos or less direct and more race based. Now they're more sexually related. I have a lot of sexual threats, which I thought was concerning."

The psychological toll creates a climate where women of color must constantly navigate between authentic leadership and survival. A Midwestern representative described the

impossible position of responding to harassment: "If I had retaliated, not necessarily physically, but just any kind of retaliation away from this group that was persecuting me, do you know what title I would have got? Angry Black woman!"

d. Capitols Lack Basic Security Infrastructure And Safety Response Planning

State capitols across the country present a fundamental tension between democratic accessibility and security requirements. Many legislators consistently describe these facilities as inadequately protected spaces where threats can materialize without warning or sufficient institutional response. The combination of minimal security infrastructure and inadequate protocols creates conditions that compromise legislators' ability to perform their duties effectively.

Our analysis of interviews and surveys identified substantial variation in state capitol security measures, with many facilities providing minimal protection. Some legislators described capitols lacking basic security infrastructure. In one Northeastern state, a representative noted: "We don't even have a metal detector, that's so scary." She explained that only "maybe five police officers patrol the entire capitol complex consisting of multiple buildings." During orientation, the former chief of police outlined their active shooter protocol as "shoot them until they weren't able to hold the gun anymore."

Similar vulnerabilities were documented in other states as well. A Midwestern representative illustrated unrestricted access: "I would walk up State Street, walk into the Capitol on one side, walk out the other side on my way to the bank, completely unobstructed." Her state capitol maintains "eight entrances on the main floor, four entrances on the floor above it, and we have no screening, no metal detectors, no security measures going in and out of the building." Additionally, "concealed carry is permitted in the building if you have a permit."

Multiple legislators reported heightened vulnerability during contentious debates when public attendance increases. A West Coast representative described feeling "totally unsafe, especially when there's hot topics. The galleries

get filled with people. They didn't go through a metal detector. If you got up on the mic and said something that made someone mad, there's no stopping them. They could just fire. It's terrifying."

Institutional Safety Gaps
The top safety gaps women legislators say must be addressed.

53% Lack of training on handling threats

46% No panic button to report incident

42% Lack of clear reporting procedures

40% Inadequate technological solutions

39% Buildings feel too exposed

37% Limited mental health support

30% Inadequate leadership support

24% Insufficient security officers

21% Insufficient legal support

20% Poor coordination with law enforcement

n=127

Figure 4: Institutional safety gaps.

Even facilities with security measures demonstrate concerning gaps in effectiveness. One senator described an incident where someone testifying before her committee brought "a bump stock as well as parts of a ghost gun" into the capitol. She noted it was "concerning that the parts didn't get picked up by the weapons detector right away," raising questions about detection capabilities for disassembled weapons.

Perhaps most troubling, some legislators reported that known threats maintain unrestricted capitol access. A Southern delegate described how "the guy who had a hit list was allowed to come into the chamber that day. He comes into the chamber all the time." Despite being known to authorities, this individual retained full building access. The delegate characterized this as "totally unsafe," noting that "even if he wasn't a physical threat, his presence alone creates such mental trauma." Significantly, "all 100 of our delegation didn't even know that this happened."

Institutional safety responses demonstrate equal inadequacy. Many legislators reported safety training that ranges from minimal to nonexistent across jurisdictions. In one Northeastern state where firearms are permitted on the House floor and in gallery areas, a representative characterized safety training as essentially "a fire drill" that instructs legislators to "take this route to get to one of the doors. It's really not very comprehensive." Scale considerations highlight the inadequacy: "You got 400 people in a room. Where do they go? And what about the handicapped people?"

Some institutional responses appear substantive while remaining fundamentally inadequate. Despite months of advocacy from women legislators, a West Coast senator characterized her state's safety plan as "cursory" and dismissive: "It all seems a little bit like, 'Okay, just make her happy.' They've got a plan, and it's a big, fat plan. And guess what, no one's going to read it." Even with designated floor wardens and zone wardens, she admits she doesn't "feel like you're protected." A former Sergeant-At-Arms explained the fundamental problem: current evacuation procedures create "the worst possible scenario" because "you're all filing down the steps."

Basic safety infrastructure often proves problematic or poorly maintained. Some legislators noted that panic buttons exist but "a lot of people don't know where they are, because furniture gets moved around and the button doesn't get moved around. My button is all the way across the room from my desk." In another state, a representative described minimal police presence: "We're just supposed to trust and believe that these

five police officers walking from the whole Capitol complex, which is like multiple buildings, are able to have eyes out everywhere."

Communication failures compound these systemic weaknesses, often becoming apparent only during actual emergencies. A Southern delegate described multiple lockdown incidents that exposed critical gaps: "We've had a couple times where we were locked in chambers. One we didn't even know about when we were actually in session. They did kind of lock us in because there was an altercation right outside." Staff members "didn't really know what was going on," illustrating how communication breakdowns leave personnel uninformed during emergencies.

Emergency communication systems, where they exist, often prove dysfunctional. A Midwestern representative described attempting to access an alert system: "There is some sort of a phone tree kind of alert thing, but when I called to try to get put on it, they couldn't figure out how to do it, and they never called me back." Despite orientation materials describing the system, she remained without emergency communication access months later.

Many legislators consistently reported lacking clear protocols for threat reporting. One Southern delegate summarized this institutional gap: "There is no mechanism in place for us to go to say, 'Hey, this is happening. What do we do?'" Another representative described the frustration of trying to report threats: "Had I not gone down there to the Capitol, I wouldn't have known my email was even received by the officer."

Legislators noted confusion about jurisdiction and responsibility, with unclear protocols about which agencies handle different types of threats. Several legislators reported that training programs, where they exist, prove woefully inadequate. One West Coast senator has been "asking for going on two years for drills" but continues to receive only promises: "I just keep getting the 'Oh, yeah, ma'am, we're working on it'. It's very lovely and respectful, but I haven't got anything in hand." The absence of practical preparation leaves legislators vulnerable even when comprehensive plans exist on paper.

These combined infrastructure and institutional failures create conditions where legislators must balance democratic accessibility requirements with personal security concerns

while receiving minimal institutional support.

Safety Protocol Awareness Gap
Over 40% of women legislators say they are unsure or unaware of protocols.

Unsure: 19%
No: 27%
Yes: 54%
n=127
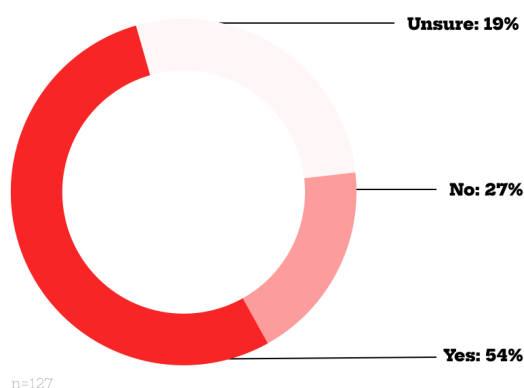
Figure 5: Awareness of institutional safety protocols.

The inadequacy of formal security measures has led to dark humor among some legislators, with one joking about their building's safety plan: "Our friends who carry will shoot the bad guys."

e. We Can't Trust Law Enforcement to Protect Us

Law enforcement's response to legislative security concerns reveals systematic problems including political bias, inconsistent treatment, and gaps in professional protocols. Our research identified instances where officers inject political considerations into security decisions, provide uneven protection based on personal preferences, and fail to respond appropriately to legitimate threats against elected officials.

Political considerations directly influence police responses to some legislators in ways that compromise their safety. A Southern senator experienced direct retaliation when she questioned legislation favored by state troopers. After she spoke against the bill, "there was a State trooper who sent out nasty texts about me, attacking me, accusing me that I was trying to kill that legislation and saying that they will never support me, and they're going to do everything in their power to stop me." The harassment made the senator "nervous driving home because the State Troopers. I had no idea if he was speaking on behalf of all State troopers. I was nervous that I

might get pulled over in the middle of nowhere on my five hour drive."

Some legislators identified systemic failures that appear influenced by demographic characteristics. A Midwestern legislator articulated this disparity: "Who do you call when you can't trust the police when they appear to be involved in the threats that are happening to you. No one wants to do anything unless you are 'bleeding' or 'dead.' There is a different level of care and response based on your race, gender and zip code."

In some cases, law enforcement connections actively protect harassers while failing to assist the legislators they are sworn to serve. A Midwestern legislator described a particularly concerning interaction,"One person threatened to pull out a gun, this same person stalked my mother and my daughter and police refused to help because he called them before he did it and has friends in the department."

Several legislators reported inconsistent treatment without clear rationale or standard protocols. A Midwestern representative observed that "different people have gotten different reactions" from Capitol police, noting that "I think you get different answers depending on the question you ask" and "sometimes it is who you're talking to there." The quality of protection appears to depend on which officer responds rather than established professional standards.

Law enforcement routinely dismisses legitimate security concerns using arbitrary standards. A Western representative experienced this when security officials told her a reported threat "doesn't rise to the level of illegality, because it was more intellectual than it was, I don't know, whatever they perceive as being a threat." Officers appear to apply their own definitions of danger rather than professional threat assessment protocols.

Communication failures represent standard practice rather than isolated incidents. Multiple legislators described inadequate follow-up on reported threats. One Northeastern representative noted: "What exists now is very vague. There isn't clarity about what's done after that. Like, there's not even an email sent back to us saying your threat has been received or we're looking into it." A Southern delegate experienced similar problems: "Even though they contacted the police, they never contacted us to say there was a

threat online after we reported it. There was no feedback from the report."

The threshold for police action remains restrictively high, leaving legislators vulnerable to sustained harassment campaigns. The Southern delegate described the standard: "The only thing that they really do is if there is an active threat when you're there. There's no resources available for this type of stuff." Even documented threats often fail to trigger meaningful responses.

This political interference creates broader concerns about law enforcement's willingness to protect all legislators equally. A Southern delegate captured this concern: "If you are a progressive woman legislator who has voted for police accountability, for example, can you expect that they are going to come and defend you or protect you."

f. "Blowing Off Steam" Defense Transforms Threats Into Protected Speech

The legal system's treatment of threats against women legislators reveals constitutional and statutory frameworks that systematically advantage harassers while leaving elected officials with limited recourse. Recent court cases demonstrate how legal doctrines designed to protect free speech create safe harbors for those who terrorize women in public service, resulting in what people term "lawful but awful" behavior.

Court decisions illustrate this dynamic clearly. Despite a defendant admitting he made death threats against a Midwestern representative after a 2020 state capitol attack, jurors accepted his defense that he was merely "blowing off steam." The acquittal had immediate consequences: "He immediately began taunting me on social media after the verdict," the representative added.

The First Amendment creates constraints that leave many female legislators legally defenseless against sustained harassment campaigns. A Southern representative faces daily harassment without meaningful recourse: "We're told we can't block people, even if they're harassing us, because of First Amendment rights. But it's hard when someone is calling you a bitch every day in the comments."

This protection extends to systematic campaigns of intimidation that would constitute

workplace harassment in other contexts. A Northeastern representative documented two years of escalating behavior from one individual involving "terrible emails, threatening emails, dehumanizing emails, to women, to people of color, and to members of the LGBTQI community." The institutional response remained consistent: "Well, there's really nothing we can do."

Multiple legislators acknowledged the inadequacy of existing legal frameworks. A former Southern legislator summarized the fundamental problem: "Not enough laws protect us" and emphasized the need for "stiffer penalties" to address the current legal vacuum that allows harassment to flourish with minimal consequences.

Digital platforms have transformed the harassment landscape in ways that existing legal frameworks have not addressed. A Midwestern legislator described how technology has altered public discourse: "Social Media has changed our culture and makes it permissible for keyboard warriors to have more than their say. It isn't about freedom of speech anymore it's about freedom from harassment and untrue dialogue that if left on its own becomes the 'truth.' Today the likes, clicks, shares have become the currency of online discourse."

Many legislators reported that individuals who leave threatening or abusive messages online often refuse to engage when contacted directly. When legislators attempt to call back or arrange face-to-face meetings, these same individuals frequently refuse to answer their phones or meet in person. In rare instances when confrontations occur face-to-face, harassers often behave normally or express surprise at their previous conduct, saying things like "Oh I don't know why I said that." This pattern reveals how digital platforms enable dehumanization that allows behavior people would never consider acceptable in person.

Transparency laws compound these vulnerabilities in unintended ways. A West Coast senator discovered how public records requests become harassment tools: "Because we're elected officials, they do public records requests on us. He has my cell phone number. He has my legislative aide's personal cell phone number. I don't think that our public records acknowledge or understand that there are safety risks with so many of us women specifically in office."

Social media platforms compound the problem through legal doctrine that treats legislators' accounts as public forums, preventing them from controlling abusive content. As one legislator explained: "It's tricky because our Facebook pages are considered public forums. That means I can't delete hate comments or ban people." The law deliberately disadvantages public officials in these situations.

A Northeastern representative, drawing on her legal background, outlined the structural inequality: "My recollection from law school is that even as a public official, we're actually under different scrutiny. I can't sue people for libel or defamation unless, as a public official, I have more limited rights than a regular everyday citizen."

When legislators attempt self-protection, their options prove severely limited. A Southern representative described her constrained toolkit: "When it's online, there's really not a lot we can do because of the First Amendment. We really can't, unless it really gets to the point where it seems like a very targeted threat." Her primary defensive measure barely qualifies as protection: "What I will do in certain instances where I can, I'll just mute them so that they can still talk to me. But I can't see what they're saying."

The constitutional balance remains deliberately tilted against those who serve in elected office. As the Northeastern representative observed: "There is that balance between First Amendment rights. And you know, where does that line cross when it comes to harassment? But I think that that is the struggle."

II.   The Incidents

Traditional definitions of political violence capture only a fraction of the threats facing women legislators. While Capitol Police respond to explicit death threats like the Instagram message promising to "shoot you and your staff," this narrow framework misses the systematic nature of harassment designed to drive women from office. The gendered nature of harassment against women legislators operates as more than the sum of its parts. Each category of incidents of harm works in concert with the others to create an environment designed to drive women from public office. Sexual harassment incidents, stalking behaviors, professional disrespect, appearance based attacks, and intellectual undermining combine systematically. The accrued incidents add up to a clear message: women's participation in democratic governance is conditional, contested, and costly in ways that men's participation simply is not.

We built an expanded analytical framework that moves beyond researcher imposed definitions to capture what women legislators themselves identify as threatening. This approach revealed twelve distinct categories of incidents of harm, expanding analysis beyond the conventional focus on physical violence. The documented incidents show a comprehensive pattern: campaign materials set ablaze with accelerant soaked rags, spoofed social media accounts soliciting donations, constituents who corner legislators at their cars, weapon components brought past security during hearings, and figures waiting in driveways at night forcing legislators to flee and call police.
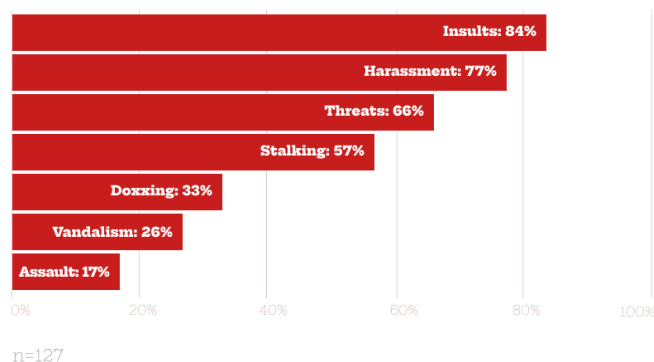
Figure 6: Occurrences of incidents of harm.

The expanded typology identifies four categories of incidents of harm that uniquely target women. Misogynistic attacks simultaneously question competence and sexualize bodies, as one legislator noted: "Our bodies get objectified and sexualized and fetishized." Women of color face amplified threats combining racial and sexual harassment, with legislators reporting being called "big lipped, n****s" alongside attacks on physical characteristics. Male colleagues systematically appropriate women's legislative contributions, with one legislator documenting how despite having "three times the donors, he had twice the money just because he is a man." Institutional dismissal treats women's safety concerns as overreactions, creating environments where legislators report being "safer in public spaces than in the office sometimes." These twelve categories of incidents of harm work in concert to create what amounts to a systematic campaign of democratic exclusion.

Typology of Incidents

The types of different incidents reported by women legislators.

THREAT	DEFINITION	IN HER WORDS
1. Death Threats	Explicit promises of murder or fatal harm directed at legislators.	A legislator received an Instagram message that said, "I'm going to come to your office and shoot you and your staff."
2. Physical Attacks	Actual physical violence, confrontations, and assaults against legislators.	While greeting constituents at office hours, a legislator was followed by a man who cornered her at her car: "He wouldn't let me go, and followed me to my car."
3. Property Destruction and Vandalism	Deliberate damage to campaign materials, vehicles, and personal property.	During her campaign, a legislator found her yard signs burning with accelerant-soaked rags: "My signs were being lit on fire. These were very intentional."
4. Menacing Presence	Display or presence of firearms, staring, recording unnecessarily and weapons to create fear and intimidate.	A legislator talks about how someone, "brought a bump stock and parts of a ghost gun," which had slipped past security during a legislative hearing.
5. Home Invasions and Trespassing	Unauthorized entry into legislators' private residences and personal spaces.	One night, a legislator saw someone waiting at her drivelway: "Someone came to my house at 10 o'clock. I had to drive away and call the police."
6. Drills, Bomb Threats, and Capitol Lockdowns	Immediate physical danger situations requiring emergency response and evacuation.	A legislator recounted a lockdown during session: "They locked us in chambers because there was an altercation going on right outside. It was so scary."
7. Family Targeting	Threats and harassment directed at legislators' spouses, children, and relatives.	After expressing support for LGBTQ rights, FL Rep. recalled: "I was called a pedophile... all sorts of names."
8. Workplace Bullying	Harassment occurring within legislative interactions and professional government settings.	A legislator said, "You're safer in public spaces than in the office sometimes."
9. Misinformation, Disinformation, and Spoofing	False information campaigns, fake social media accounts, and identity theft for harassment purposes.	A legislator recalled, "Someone spoofed me on Facebook and asked people for money."
10. Sexual Violence Threats and Harassment	Threats of rape, sexual assault, or other forms of sexual violence, along with sexualized comments designed to reduce women legislators to sexual objects rather than political actors.	A legislator recounted her comments on social media, "Our bodies get objectified and sexualized and fetishized."
11. Professional Disrespect and Dismissal	Systematic undermining of women's professional authority through dismissive treatment, exclusion from decision-making, credit theft, and assumptions that women don't belong in positions of power.	A legislator pointed out gendered funding disparities: "I had three times the donors, but he had twice the money just because he is a man."
12. Intolerant or Toxic Comments	Derogatory remarks that are beyond the purview of fair criticism	A legislator talks about her experiences, "They attacked our physical characteristics... called us big-lipped, niggers."

Chapter 2: The Toll

Threats and harassment against women legislators create devastating consequences for well-being that ripple through every dimension of their lives. Beyond the immediate fear and anxiety these attacks generate, they fundamentally reshape how elected women navigate their roles as public servants, family members, and professional leaders. This chapter discusses the negative effects on well-being of exposure to harmful incidents. The scope of harm documented in this research extends from severe mental health impacts to the erosion of family relationships, staff welfare concerns, and compromised governance capacity.

What emerges from these accounts is not simply individual trauma but a systematic pattern of psychological pressure, harassment, and abuse that has become normalized as a necessary cost of political participation for women. Legislators describe living in states of chronic hypervigilance, making strategic compromises in their advocacy, and bearing additional burdens of protecting vulnerable staff and family members who become unintended targets.

The data reveals five critical areas where psychological harm manifests: severe mental health deterioration from constant threat exposure, devastating betrayal by expected political allies, overwhelming responsibility for protecting staff caught in hostile situations, family relationships transformed into sources of vulnerability rather than support, and profound isolation created when suffering in silence becomes necessary for political survival. These pressures culminate in altered governance practices, where women must factor personal safety calculations into every aspect of their legislative work in ways that their male colleagues rarely face or even acknowledge.

I. Living In Constant Fear: When Peace Of Mind And Health Are Compromised

The psychological toll exacted by threats and harassment has left legislators across the country grappling with profound mental health challenges that fundamentally alter their capacity to function both professionally and personally. What emerges from their accounts is a portrait of public servants whose emotional well-being has been systematically eroded, leaving them struggling with anxiety, depression, hypervigilance, and in some cases, suicidal ideation.

The physical manifestations of chronic stress appear with disturbing regularity. A legislator from Alaska reported experiencing "stress, insomnia, weight gain, martial discord," while a representative from Connecticut described enduring "sleeplessness, anxiety, diminished sense of safety." These symptoms speak to nervous systems in constant overdrive, with many legislators admitting to feeling "shaky and uneasy showing up to public events."

Hypervigilance has become the exhausting baseline for many legislators' daily existence. Multiple representatives reported maintaining a "heightened sense of my surroundings," with a legislator from Ohio noting that awareness of her "sense of safety is always 'on.'" This constant state of alert takes a particular toll in professional settings, as a representative from Montana revealed: "Not having to wonder who on the floor is like has a concealed carry on them like that's a big one for me."

Paranoid thinking creeps into even routine activities. A legislator from West Virginia described the consuming nature of these fears: "I just begin to get a little paranoid... is he following? How is he following? He can't follow my page. I have him blocked. Is he looking through his daughter's page…? I just began to get a little paranoid."

The trauma responses can be severe and debilitating. A representative from Michigan said, "I no longer felt safe at work, in public, or at home. I became extremely reclusive and suffered from panic attacks whenever I left my home." In the most devastating and extreme case, a state legislator from Washington revealed: "I basically tried. I almost died by suicide, because I thought that the threats and the attacks are so horrible."

Many legislators describe a disturbing emotional detachment as they attempt to function

despite constant fear. A representative from New Mexico captured this dissociation: "With the political temperature continuing to increase, I find myself thinking 'well, might get shot today' and just moving on with my day, albeit a bit disconnected knowing we could be walking into danger at any moment."

Anxiety permeates mundane activities. A legislator from Maine explained how fears affected simple errands."It is not about physical safety as much as thinking who might barricade me at the grocery store. Emotionally it can be tough." Even workplaces become sources of dread, as a representative from Maryland described: "It is frightening to be in my office alone because our office is at the end of the hall. The lights are motion sensitive and they go out in the hall to total darkness."

The fear extends to their homes, traditionally places of refuge. A legislator from Florida expressed the terror of being alone: "I was very, very nervous. I was afraid that someone was going to come to the house, and, you know, try to do something." The violation of home as a safe space becomes particularly acute when public records laws expose legislators' personal information to those with malicious intent. A legislator from Georgia described experiencing direct attacks on her residence: "I have been 'pizza'd' and swatted at my home, which means that a lot of people with ill intent have my home address." In this context, "pizza'd" generally means to have pizza ordered to your house with a false emergency message in order to have SWAT sent to one's home. Professional gatherings now trigger anxiety, with a representative from West Virginia describing her fears: "When you really think about it, a lot, all of the conferences that we attend, those would be the opportune time for someone to attack."

The burden of self-education and training adds yet another dimension to the toll on their mental health. A legislator from Florida describes the exhausting scope of self-reliance required: "everything I've done, I've done myself, with the entire training that we put together, that was me and my brain." The transformation into a self-taught security professional while maintaining legislative duties creates competing demands on time, energy, and mental resources.

A persistent sense of unease becomes their new normal. A representative from North Carolina described this constant state: "I'm simply never quite sure I am safe. It's a nagging feeling." The simple desire for psychological normalcy becomes an almost impossible dream. A legislator from Florida expressed a basic wish: "I know I chose this life, but I still want to feel like I'm a normal person. A human being."

II. The Pain of Betrayal Runs Deep: When Allies Become Adversaries

The most painful attacks on women legislators often come not from across the aisle, but from within their own circles: fellow women and party members who would be considered natural allies. This internal warfare creates a particularly damaging dynamic that undermines women's political power and takes a devastating psychological toll.

An assemblywoman from New Jersey captures the essence of this problem with stark clarity: "Women would have a quarter of the pie, and men would have the three quarters. But the problem is, women would be fighting amongst everybody to get that one quarter. Get a piece of that one quarter, not a piece of the whole pie, because we know that you're not going to get it, but a piece of that one quarter. So we tend to not be. We tend to be more in competition with each other than men are."

This scarcity mindset creates what the New Jersey assemblywoman describes as "frenemy" relationships among women legislators. The competition becomes so intense that even attempts at organizing break down: "When we talk about having women, groups and women caucuses that lasts for only so long, then we get into that competition mode where everybody just needs to do what they want to do and not stop listening."

The betrayal cuts deepest when it comes from former friends within the same party. A representative from Kansas experienced this firsthand when her predecessor, once a close friend with whom she raised children, turned antagonistic after she won the seat. "We were friends because we raised our kids together. But then we were no longer friends, and she trolls me online at times," the Kansas legislator explains. The personal nature of the attacks illustrates how political competition can destroy longstanding personal relationships.

A legislator from Florida discovered that same party members can be the most ruthless critics of her policies. After voting against a ceasefire resolution related to the war on Gaza that she felt was incomplete, the Florida representative was "attacked locally" and had "people just come after me the most," despite being one of only two legislators who voted against it. What made the attacks particularly painful was their source: "These were people I was friends with, like these were people that I knew offline in person." The fact that these critics "had my phone number" and "could actually call me" but chose instead to "just went on like Instagram and Facebook, and just kind of started like, kind of, you know, airing their grievances in a very public space" demonstrated the calculated nature of the public shaming.

Perhaps most damaging is the lack of support from within the party when attacks occur. A representative from Washington found that "even when I would talk to my Democratic colleagues, they would kind of look at me like, well, maybe you deserve it like, are you doing something wrong, you know, like people just could not fathom that someone would lie about you or or attack you." When reaching out for help after a suicide attempt, the Washington state legislator was told by support resources that "you opted in to be an elected official, it's on you right?" The message was clear: she had chosen to be an elected official, so the consequences were her responsibility.

A legislator from Louisiana captures the particular sting of betrayal from supposed allies: "Concerning threats, bullying, unfair treatment, etc, I came into this position knowing full well that serving in public office is just like what I experienced and witnessed as an elementary school student on the playground at recess. The only difference is the people are older and larger. Bullies are gonna bully and they need to be dealt with the same way whether you are eight or 48--stand up to them and don't let them deter you. Emotionally, I am disgusted that the worst treatment I have experienced in all my years in office did not come from the public. It came repeatedly from fellow lawmakers who were in positions of leadership. We were even in the same political party. Horrible!"

III. Staff Caught In The Crossfire: When Respite Becomes Responsibility

The responsibility of protecting staff creates one of the most emotionally challenging aspects of legislative service, as elected officials grapple with exposing their teams to risks they never anticipated when accepting public service roles. Legislative staff frequently serve as the first line of contact with agitated constituents, effectively functioning as human shields for their elected bosses. As a representative from Michigan explains, her staff "faced a lot of these things. So they take on a little bit of the trauma before it hits me." This protective buffer system means staff members absorb much of the initial hostility before it reaches the legislator, creating what many describe as "collateral damage" from threats intended for elected officials.

The filtering role staff play becomes particularly evident in how constituents treat them differently than the legislators themselves. A senator from California observed this dynamic directly, referring to a disgruntled constituent, saying "she treated my staff like shit, and she was disrespectful to my staff. and then the moment I come in, you know she's like, 'Oh, let me be more respectful'." This differential treatment means staff bear the brunt of constituent anger while being afforded none of the respect typically given to elected officials. The knowledge that staff members face this abuse purely through their employment creates profound guilt and concern among legislators.

The emotional weight of staff vulnerability becomes overwhelming when legislators witness their teams' dedication despite the risks. A Michigan representative expressed this burden with deep emotion: "I felt for my staff... they were literally fearing for my life." The realization that dedicated staff members not only face their own risks but also worry about their boss's safety compounds the emotional toll on legislators. This representative went on to describe the extraordinary commitment of her team: "And then I have to just say this here because these two

young people you're looking at on the screen. They could go anywhere and work for anybody because they are super talented, but they probably take more abuse than I do when they get calls from irrational people in my district." The knowledge that staff members are making sacrifices to stay in dangerous positions intensifies the protective burden legislators feel. She ultimately expressed both gratitude and guilt about her staff's loyalty: "And one day I'm gonna push them both out of the nest because they deserve much more money and much more everything. But for right now they're trying to help."

The responsibility extends beyond emotional support to practical protection decisions that keep legislators awake at night. A representative from Florida captures this multifaceted worry: "So a part of it is not just my safety, but the team's safety, right? Because I would be like, I mean, I'm always worried about when I'm not at the office, somebody's showing up and harassing a team, me not being there to manage it, because my team is also predominantly young women in their 20s." The constant anxiety about what might happen when they're not present to intervene creates a persistent state of worry that follows legislators beyond their work hours.

The complexity of managing staff safety becomes particularly challenging when legislators recognize their own limitations in protecting others. The Florida representative described a confrontational situation: "But like my poor team, right? They're all younger, like, they've never necessarily dealt with they've navigated, maybe, like aggressive people on the phone, but not necessarily like confrontations, right? So I'm really sensitive to that." The awareness that staff members may face situations they're unprepared for, combined with the legislator's own vulnerability, creates a cycle of worry and protective instinct.

The inability to provide adequate protection training creates additional anxiety. A representative from Massachusetts explains her dilemma: "I sometimes have staffers going to different events with me, but not all the time, and frankly, they're not trained, and I don't expect them to be trained on, you know, defense or anything... it's not protective services where a bullet comes their jobs that jump in front of me. That's not part of the description. Nor do I want that to be." The

tension between needing support at events and not wanting to endanger untrained staff creates impossible choices that weigh heavily on legislators' consciences.

IV. Family as Both Shield and Target: When Love Becomes Vulnerability

The impact of threats and harassment on elected officials' families reveals the devastating ways that political harm transforms family relationships into sources of vulnerability and anguish, while paradoxically making the absence of family members feel like a form of protection. Beyond the emotional toll, the presence of vulnerable family members fundamentally alters how officials approach their legislative work and personal relationships in ways that compromise both democratic representation and family well-being.

The presence of children at home creates the most complex vulnerabilities, directly constraining officials' legislative priorities and advocacy intensity while generating persistent anxiety about their safety. A representative from Ohio revealed the profound impact of having a child still living at home on her policy work: "I still have a child at home. And so there's a significant consideration to some of the work that I do. That I go deep in and lean in while they are still living at home versus when they're out of the house. I'm very interested in common sense gun legislation." The official explained how having a child at home forced her to modulate her advocacy: "It's not that I'm not doing the work. It's just how out loud am I going to get at this moment in time? Can this wait a couple more months till they're out of the house, so that I'm not concerned about their safety?" This represents a fundamental compromise of democratic representation, where officials must choose between full advocacy for their constituents and protection of their children.

When children's experiences with their parents' political roles involve actively seeking out information about threats against their parents, the situation becomes even more distressing. A senator from West Virginia described the anguish of watching her daughter with anxiety issues consume all her social media threatening content: "She really wants to know what's going on. So she is watching, she is looking at social media posts,

and she will tell me, 'Mom, look at this,' which is terrible because she's the one that has higher anxiety too."

The complex relief that accompanies children's departure from the home becomes evident in how officials describe their changed circumstances and future possibilities. The Ohio representative explicitly acknowledged the liberation that an empty nest would provide for her legislative work: "I will be an empty nester, and I think at that point I know it'll be sad, but I will think that piece of the puzzle will be easier for me to lean in a little more forcefully." A representative from Florida articulated both ongoing concern and implicit relief that distance provides: "I'm concerned for my family. I'm afraid that if people get angry enough they will try to come to our house. So I worry about my daughter. She doesn't live here anymore. She does live far away now, but when she did live here I was concerned for her safety." The shift from past to present tense reveals how her daughter's departure transformed active, immediate fear into a more manageable, distant concern.

Spouses consistently demonstrate higher levels of sustained anxiety than the officials themselves, often bearing a heavier emotional burden that creates ongoing relationship strain. A legislator from West Virginia observed that threats "probably impact my husband more than me. I think he's more upset about the threats and more concerned about my security than I am." This disparity in threat perception forces couples to navigate different comfort levels with risk while managing the persistent fear that political service has introduced into their relationship. The most devastating example comes from the Michigan representative, who described the impossible emotional calculus that threats force upon marriages: "When the threats were really bad, I would tell my husband to stay away from me because if they're gonna shoot me, I didn't want them to kill us both. And that's real." This admission reveals how political harm can poison the most fundamental human connections, forcing spouses to choose between proximity and safety, and transforming love into a potential liability.

Extended family members, particularly mothers, become additional sources of anxiety rather than support networks. A representative from Wisconsin described how her mother's

constant security concerns created ongoing tension: "My mom makes me very nervous every time she says, 'Is this safe?' I was speaking at an opening for a center and my mom's like, 'What kind of security are they going to have?' Things like that were things that I never thought about before, and that I have started to think about more." This intergenerational transmission of anxiety demonstrates how political threats create expanding circles of fear that encompass multiple family generations.

The weight of family impact becomes so overwhelming that some officials seriously reconsider their political futures entirely. A representative from North Dakota revealed that the threats "caused me to reconsider seeking reelection," while an official from Missouri described how "online threats targeting my kids and ex husband made me question resigning. I blamed myself for putting them in harm's way."

An Idaho legislator sums up the known toll: "If [I were] married and had kids, [I] wouldn't be doing this job right now."

V.   The Weight of Silence: When Suffering Alone Becomes Part of the Job

The narratives of women legislators reveal a profound pattern of isolation and suffering in silence, where the normalization of harassment and threats becomes a survival mechanism in political life. This isolation manifests in multiple interconnected ways, creating a web of silence that traps these women in cycles of enduring harm alone.

The fundamental loneliness experienced by these legislators is stark and pervasive. As a delegate from West Virginia explained, "I don't feel unsafe in that way, but I do recognize that I definitely have to be stronger individually in my ability to protect and be aware. I don't have that husband that can say, Hey, look at your surroundings." This absence of support systems forces women into hypervigilance and self-reliance, particularly when traveling or in public spaces. The isolation extends beyond personal relationships to professional contexts, where even among colleagues, genuine support can be elusive.

For single mothers in office, the burden of isolation becomes compounded by protective instincts toward their children. A representative from New Hampshire shared her deliberate choice to shield her family: "I did not talk to my kids about it. I don't think I brought that up at all, because I wouldn't want to scare them anyway." This protective silence creates additional layers of isolation, as these women cannot even seek comfort or processing within their immediate family units, leaving them to bear the psychological weight of threats and harassment entirely alone.

The inability to confide in colleagues or professional networks emerges as another significant source of isolation. A representative from Michigan described the political reality that constrains authentic communication: "If I go to try to confide in somebody, they're gonna tell everybody that she's complaining. So let's get her out of office because she can't handle her work. So I just keep it inside." This fear of being perceived as weak or unable to perform the job creates a culture where vulnerability is seen as political liability, forcing women to internalize their struggles rather than seek support.

The expectation to project strength and confidence becomes a performance that further isolates these women from authentic connection and support. A senator from Ohio articulated this mindset: "You can't walk around fearful and cowering. People are going to sense that, and they'll go after you." This pressure to maintain a facade of invulnerability means that even when support might be available, these women feel compelled to reject it in favor of projecting toughness. The same legislator emphasized, "So walk with confidence," revealing how the performance of strength becomes both a protective mechanism and barrier to genuine connection.

Many legislators express reluctance to involve law enforcement or formal reporting mechanisms for online harassment, viewing such actions as potentially ineffective or burdensome. A representative from Wisconsin noted, "The concern has really been around my Capitol office or sort of online stuff where I haven't felt the need to engage police." This reluctance stems partly from a perception that online threats don't warrant police attention and partly from a desire not to be seen as unable to handle the pressures of public office independently.

The strategic decision to remain silent about threats and harassment reflects another dimension of isolation, where legislators feel they must choose between speaking out and potentially escalating danger. A legislator from Florida explained her careful approach: "I haven't said anything about it, because I'm waiting for the case to be over... I'm a little hesitant to share things, like I used to, just because I don't want to egg someone on and motivate them to become more aggressive." This silence, while potentially protective, also cuts these women off from potential sources of support and solidarity.

Over time, many legislators develop a form of psychological numbing as a coping mechanism. As a legislator from Indiana noted, "To be honest, you have to become desensitized to the noise. Online threats and hateful messages have, unfortunately, become routine." This desensitization, while protective, also represents a form of isolation from their own emotional responses and needs. A representative from Washington described a similar adaptation: "I get so many people that don't like me, anyway, for other reasons, like I just... it's just more universal." This normalization of hostility becomes a way of managing overwhelming negativity, but it also distances these women from recognizing the abnormality and unacceptability of their treatment.

The internalization of harassment and threats as simply "part of the job" represents perhaps the most profound form of isolation. A legislator from Florida captured this resignation: "Sometimes feeling like... people say stuff, you know... and it's not even just like a partisan thing. It's just some of our colleagues feeling like, well, you know, it comes with the territory." This normalization prevents these women from demanding better treatment or seeking adequate support systems, as they've been conditioned to view their suffering as an inevitable aspect of political participation rather than an unacceptable condition that requires intervention and change.

VI. The Hidden Cost of Governing Under Threat

The persistent fear of harassment forces women legislators to navigate their duties through an additional layer of calculation and constraint that fundamentally alters their experience of governance. While these legislators continue to fulfill their responsibilities, they must do so while constantly weighing the personal costs of various actions, creating a psychological burden that shapes how they approach their work. This fear operates as an invisible modifier to every aspect of legislative service, forcing adaptations that protect personal safety while maintaining professional obligations.

Impact On Legislative Duties
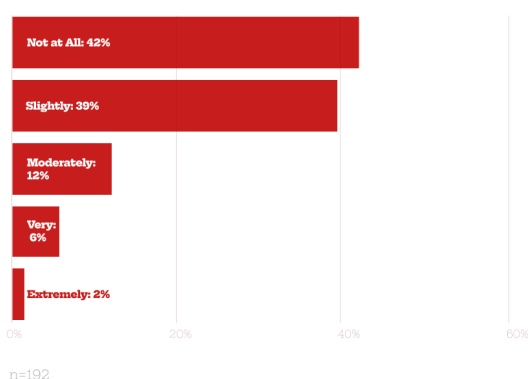For many, harassment is a disruption, even if not extreme.

Not at All: 42%
Slightly: 39%
Moderately: 12%
Very: 6%
Extremely: 2%

n=192

Figure 8: Impact of incidents of harm on legislative duties.

Impact On Desire To Stay In Office
Nearly 1 in 3 say harassment has affected their desire to stay in public office.
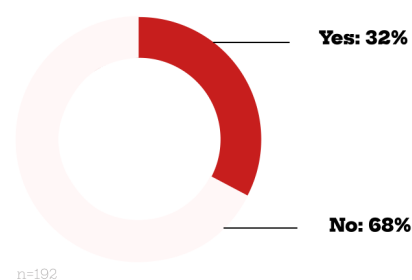
Yes: 32%
No: 68%

n=192

Figure 9: Impact of incidents of harm on desire to stay in office.

The voting process becomes particularly complex as legislators must consider not only policy merits but potential retaliation. A representative from South Carolina describes how this anxiety infiltrates decision-making: "It's in your mind, how are they going to attack me on this' and it affects how you govern." This additional calculation doesn't prevent voting, but it adds a layer of stress and strategic thinking that transforms what should be straightforward policy decisions into complex risk assessments. Legislators continue to vote according to their convictions, but must do so while mentally preparing for potential consequences.

Public engagement, a cornerstone of democratic representation, becomes fraught with additional considerations as legislators weigh the benefits of visibility against personal exposure. A representative from Pennsylvania describes this shift: "I tend to push them out of my mind and compartmentalize. The biggest challenge I face is not fear, but a decreased interest in engaging in the public parts of my job." This reflects not an inability to perform but a natural protective response that reduces enthusiasm for activities that once brought satisfaction and meaning to the work.

The desire to separate governance from its inherently public nature emerges as legislators imagine alternative ways to serve. An assemblywoman from New Jersey captures this longing: "If I could be a government elected official without going through campaigns and politics, I would probably be happy." This sentiment reveals not a rejection of public service itself, but a wish to engage in the substantive work of governance without the accompanying exposure to harassment and intimidation.

Fear also necessitates strategic accommodations in legislative work that, while not compromising core principles, require additional effort and creativity. A legislator from Oregon describes having to modify bill language due to harassment campaigns: "We literally had to change the name of the bill to get people to chill out." This adaptation allows important legislation to move forward while reducing the inflammatory rhetoric that triggers harassment, demonstrating how legislators must become strategic communicators to protect both their work and themselves.

The escalation of harassment targeting high-profile women creates a particularly ominous context for those considering career advancement.

The disturbing environment that emerged during 2020 protests in Michigan, where protesters surrounded the capitol "with guns and nooses and all kinds of frightening things" while displaying racist imagery and discussing the execution of Governor Gretchen Whitmer for treason, demonstrates the extreme nature of threats facing women in executive positions.

A representative from Florida's decision-making process regarding statewide office explicitly connects these dots: "you also look at the rhetoric that was spewed towards Michelle Obama and Kamala Harris and like all these other women of color, because it is worse for women of color." The Michigan representative's firsthand account of protesters threatening execution for a white governor while simultaneously displaying racist imagery targeting Black people demonstrates the escalating and racialized nature of harassment that accompanies higher visibility.

The intersection of racism and sexism in these high-profile attacks creates what amounts to a warning system for women of color considering advancement. The Florida legislator explains her decision against running for governor: "I definitely just don't want to do that. I just don't deserve that. I just don't think Florida is ready for that." Her reference to the treatment of prominent women of color at the national level, combined with the Michigan example of explicit threats against a sitting governor, illustrates how visible harassment serves as both warning and deterrent for potential candidates.

This pattern of escalating harassment creates a chilling effect that extends beyond across the political landscape. When legislators observe the treatment of governors like Gretchen Whitmer, who faced threats of execution, and prominent women of color at the national level, they must calculate whether their own advancement is worth subjecting themselves to similar attacks. The Florida representative's choice is to focus on local representation. "I can run first in the city of Orlando and the community I love, the community that cares about diversity and the community that I grew up in. I should just do that, it sounds a lot safer, you know, in the sense of, avoiding a physical target on my back."

The daily mental burden of operating under constant threat awareness creates an ongoing psychological challenge that legislators must manage alongside their regular duties. The same Florida legislator describes this reality: "every day I think about how easy life would be if I wasn't doing this. I mean, it would be so easy[...]I could be doing something else totally different, in a very different state and not as much hostility."

The broader impact extends to recruitment and retention, as fear creates anticipatory barriers for potential candidates. A legislator from Washington observes that potential candidates "say, 'It's not worth putting my family through this,'" while a representative from Pennsylvania notes that younger people "see the nastiness online. They're not going to want to do it." It makes legislators really ponder the personal cost of public service, as a legislator from Wyoming reflected: "They have given me a chance to reflect on the sacrifice this job takes.

individual decisions to reshape career trajectories

Chapter 3: The Path Toward Well-Being

In the following section, we describe how women state legislators return to themselves, rebuild resilience, and reimagine safety in a fractured system. We outline a number of strategies they shared with us for proactively addressing safety threats, responding to threats as they occur, and restoring their well-being after they have suffered harm. In addition to our 38 legislator interviews and 319 survey responses, we also conducted interviews with 20 experts working in this field to understand how their organizations improve legislator safety. We also asked them about specific recommendations they had for legislators and advocates working in this space, which are integrated throughout.

While many of the strategies and organizational resources have benefits for objective safety–that is, they lower the likelihood of significant harm to well-being–we also focus on their effects on perceived safety,the extent to which a person feels that their well-being is protected from future harm. A true path forward involves addressing both, as we argue that a perceived lack of safety is itself a source of harm. Fear, stress, frustration, and hopelessness are painful and corrosive emotions that, when felt consistently, impact legislator's capacity to do their job, manage their professional and personal relationships, willingness to express themselves authentically, and ultimately, maintain a sense of identity and purpose.

To mitigate these effects, we hope that knowing that there are things women can do to improve their safety, even under such difficult circumstances, will provide some measure of comfort. We do not use this term in a casual or dismissive sense; rather, comfort should be understood as relief grounded in knowledge, action, and support. It is a recalibration of perceived safety that occurs alongside improvements in actual safety, not from acting "as if" everything is okay.

I. Proactive Strategies: Knowing How To Be Prepared

Proactive approaches to increasing perceptions of safety typically aim to preempt harm before it happens. These strategies and programs focus on making legislators aware of the different harms they may be exposed to and preparing legislators by giving them resources to avoid or mitigate these harms.

Women legislators across the country have developed an intricate web of safety protocols that reflects a fundamental reorientation of how they navigate public service. This need for preparation transforms everyday activities into calculated risk assessments, creating what one Ohio representative describes as a framework where "safety is not the lack of danger. It's the presence of supportive people around you that you trust." The findings reveal five distinct dimensions of preparedness, each addressing specific vulnerabilities while building comprehensive protection frameworks.

Improving legislator safety is not just an individual endeavor; support is also offered by a number of organizations, addressing many kinds of safety threats across a multitude of approaches to harm, safety, and well-being. The best approach for legislators, we argue, would be one that combines personal strategies with the resources and advice provided by organizations. This allows them to personalize their safety routines to accommodate what works best for them while also taking advantage of the wealth of expertise encapsulated in the work that organizations do.

1. Knowing How to Brace for Impact

The psychological dimension of preparation centers on cultivating specific mindsets and awareness patterns that provide the comfort of knowing how to mentally prepare for threats. A Florida representative articulates this comprehensive anticipatory stance: "I kind of brace for impact anywhere I go, to be honest... I'm

going to be verbally assaulted... I think there's more of a constant threat of being trolled versus physically attacked. I feel more like I'm going to be verbally attacked versus physically attacked." This mental preparation represents a fundamental shift requiring constant readiness for confrontation across multiple venues and interaction types.

The comfort extends to knowing how to maintain tactical spatial awareness in any environment. A Washington senator describes her developed instincts: "I always tend to be very observant of where I am. I go into any environment. I know where my exits are. I never sit with my back to the room. I always sit with my back towards the wall." This spatial consciousness transforms every room into a strategic assessment, providing the security of knowing you understand your environment and can respond quickly if needed.

Boundary management becomes another crucial source of psychological comfort, though legislators acknowledge this as an ongoing challenge. A New Hampshire representative reflects on this dimension: "Sometimes I think, you know, maybe I could be a little better about stating my boundaries... maybe I need to be more conscientious of my boundaries in that type of situation." The comfort lies in knowing how to recognize and articulate personal limits in interpersonal dynamics, even when the political environment encourages relationship-building that can blur professional boundaries.

2. Knowing You Have Tools and Training

Physical preparedness encompasses both defensive tools and tactical behaviors, providing the comfort of knowing you can physically respond to threats. A Vermont representative details her comprehensive personal protective arsenal: "I have a flashlight that is a taser... another legislator gave me some bear spray... I also got a more inconspicuous alarm, a key chain that you pull and it makes a loud sound." These tools represent tangible extensions of preparedness, carried as insurance against unpredictable encounters and provided through informal networks of mutual support among women legislators.

Physical adaptation extends to tactical clothing and strategic movement decisions. When

facing a particularly threatening colleague, a New Hampshire representative made deliberate adjustments: "I came in with my boots on, because I knew I wanted to be able to run." A West Virginia senator describes modified navigation patterns that prioritize safety over efficiency: "I would only use the big, wide staircases and not the smaller ones, that were the much faster way to go, just because if someone was there we would have to touch. There's no way to really go next to someone without touching—you can't pass each other." The comfort lies in knowing you've made deliberate choices to enhance your physical safety and mobility options.

Firearms training represents an evolving and often reluctant dimension of physical preparation. A West Virginia delegate reflects on this necessity: "The reality is I need to take concealed carry classes. I need to be trained, you know, and not be fearful. But I need to be able to protect myself... we travel a lot, and we're traveling the whole state. We have different counties that are asking us to come and talk... are these protected places? Probably not." The comfort comes from knowing you have the capability to defend yourself if necessary, even when the decision to pursue such training conflicts with personal preferences.

Training is also one of the primary forms of proactive support offered to legislators and legislative staff by organizations. Teisha Garrett, working for the Democracy Security Project (DSP) highlighted the need for protective training that begins well before threats materialize and outlined for us several different kinds of training they offer. These include basic security training, which helps legislators secure their homes, offices, and travel accommodations against would-be attackers. Additionally, police intervention training, or "community aid," teaches legislators that find themselves in situations where "calling the police isn't necessarily an option" to make a list of safety "check downs," evaluate their other resources, determine whether there are mediators or mental health professionals nearby, and finally, how to know when calling the police becomes unavoidable. Cyber and data security training covers how to secure financial data, protect devices, and evaluate their data sharing practices. Finally, event security helps legislators to de-escalate when they are involved in or exposed

to public demonstrations that become unmanageable.

3. Knowing When the System Has Your Back

Institutional preparedness provides comfort through knowing that formal security infrastructure supports individual safety efforts, though legislators often must advocate for adequate resources. Technology-based security systems offer both functional and psychological benefits. A Wisconsin representative emphasizes the value of panic systems: "If you push that duress button, they treat it as if you are in duress, right—it is serious. And so my staff and I all have those, all of us at the Capitol." The comfort derives from knowing immediate help is literally at your fingertips and will be taken seriously.

Advanced communication systems provide critical real-time coordination capabilities. A Maryland delegate describes her state's alert system: "They have upgraded, and now they have a system that lets you know, almost like an active alert type system... similar to colleges." This infrastructure creates comfort through knowing you'll be warned of developing threats and can coordinate responses with other officials and security personnel.

Effective institutional engagement requires knowing how to make specific requests rather than general appeals for help. A Wisconsin representative emphasizes this strategic approach: "Having a sense of what would make me feel safe, or what would make me safer when I make the ask... I do tell them what I'm looking for... I might say, I want to know if this guy who posted online is serious. I have no way to know whether it's serious or not. I want to establish that and ensure that if this is a serious threat that some action is taken." The comfort emerges from knowing exactly how to articulate security needs and having established channels for specific, actionable responses.

Financial support policies enable security investments, providing comfort through knowing resources are available for protective measures. A Washington senator explains the flexibility of dual funding sources: "We can use our business account to pay for security at home. So if we had monitoring security at home, we were authorized

to use our business account to pay for that... and then on the campaign side, we can actually use our campaign money for security." This funding approach creates flexible resources for comprehensive protective measures across personal and professional domains.

4. Knowing Who To Turn To And How

Network preparedness centers on cultivated relationships that provide comfort through knowing you have reliable allies in law enforcement and community settings. A Massachusetts representative illustrates how personal connections translate into tangible protection: "We have a good relationship with the police chief, who then asked his police officers to essentially patrol my area more often." The comfort lies in knowing these relationships will activate protective responses when needed.

Peer support networks provide both practical assistance and emotional comfort. A Maryland delegate describes the informal buddy system: "There are people that you can call that you have relationships with, that will have your back if you call them, no matter what time." This network extends beyond crisis response to routine safety measures, with legislators accompanying each other to potentially uncomfortable meetings or walking together in isolated areas.

Communication protocols enable continuous family coordination. A Vermont representative describes a systematic approach involving multiple family members and tracking technologies: "My mom is in Alabama... She tracks me on my phone... my partner tracks where I'm at... I call her every time I'm walking to my car... just so that I have somebody on the phone. So if something happened she could be a witness to it." The comfort derives from knowing someone always knows your location and can serve as a witness or first responder if something occurs.

Strategic partnerships with male allies provide additional protection through visible deterrence and physical presence. A Kansas representative reflects on door-knocking strategy: "I was knocking doors with a 16 year old, and I remember thinking you should not have brought a 16 year old here. You should have brought a burly man, just to be within your sight." A Florida representative describes how having male

colleagues present creates additional security: "I do have my friend always hanging out at my office, and I really actually appreciate him being there, because I do think it just helps to have extra eyes, and he's also older—he just has more lived experience." These arrangements provide comfort through knowing you have visible male allies who can serve as deterrents and additional witnesses.

Community engagement strategies provide additional layers of protection through numbers and witnesses. A Massachusetts representative explains her approach to office hours: "I would make sure that community members are there with me. So, for instance, when we have particular office hours, we would ask my supporters, hey, come hang out with me. There will be some new people there, but it'd be great to see some familiar faces, so it's always a group setting." The comfort comes from knowing you won't be isolated during vulnerable public interactions and that trusted community members will be present to observe and potentially intervene if needed.

Organizations are not just a source of specialized expertise, but can also play an important role in referring legislators to other sources of organizational support. For example, the Bridging Divides Initiative maintains an extensive list of community safety and de-escalation resources for each state on their website.[11]

5. Knowing Your Loved Ones Are Protected

Family preparedness requires comprehensive modifications that provide comfort through knowing household members are secure from both physical and digital threats. Home security upgrades have become standard responses to threats. A Massachusetts representative describes her protective measures: "We put in a fence—we put in measures, and plus, we have two dogs... my husband had to install a video camera in front of our house." A West Virginia senator implemented additional structural barriers: "My husband had a gate installed at the bottom of our driveway, so that we can lock it."

Social media restrictions become comprehensive family-wide policies that provide comfort through knowing digital exposure is controlled. A West Virginia senator imposed extensive limitations: "I told my kids, okay, you guys don't really have freedom of speech any longer online. You are not allowed to post. You are not allowed to like, you're not allowed to dislike... Stay out of politics." A Washington senator implemented similar protections: "All your social media are locked down. You will not accept any friend requests from anyone who you don't know in real life." These restrictions often persist long-term, with the Washington senator noting that years later, her adult children "hardly post" and maintain the established protocols.

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[11] Bridging Divides Initiative, "Elevating Community Safety and De-escalation Approaches," Princeton University, accessed August 4, 2025, https://bridgingdivides.princeton.edu/policy/elevating-community-safety-and-de-escalation-approaches.

Figure 10: Proactive strategies used by legislators.

Proactive Strategies: Practical measures for before an incident of harm happens.		
Need Theme	**Actionable Strategy**	**In Her Voice**
Knowing How to Brace for Impact	Practice Mindset and Mental Readiness	I am hyper aware of my surroundings. I practice being verbally ready for assaults. I mentally prepare for every public appearance. I believe the right mindset protects you.
	Modify Routines & Environments	I always close doors behind me. I walk while talking on the phone. I avoid traveling alone or in unfamiliar areas. I stay off my phone when walking. I modified my travel routes for safety. I always know where exits are at events. I sit with my back to the wall. I scoped exits and police presence before attending events. I reduced time in unfamiliar spaces. I avoid volatile events whenever possible.
	Build Empathy and Respect as Prevention	I treat the opposition as human. I believe that giving respect earns respect. I'm mindful to disagree respectfully on policy. I believe more communal events build trust.
Knowing You Have Tools and Training	Enhance Physical Preparedness	I carry pepper spray (or bear spray / taser / personal alarm) everywhere I go. I stopped wearing stilettos so I can move faster if needed. I wear inconspicuous clothing in public. I removed my heels for escape readiness.
	Advocate for Safety System Improvements	I advocated for better safety protocols. I passed legislation allowing pepper spray. I agitated to be part of safety plan discussions. I updated emergency comms systems.
Knowing When the System Has Your Back	Engage Law Enforcement Strategically	I report threats to the police and tell them exactly what I want. I keep Capitol Police on speed dial. I built a relationship with local police. I ensure I know someone in the police force or Capitol Police. I requested that the Capitol Police patrol my area.
	Build and Coordinate Safety Infrastructure	I participate in safety drills. I coordinated emergency plans with staff. I trained my team in threat response. I scoped out other states' infrastructure to improve ours.
Knowing Who to Turn to and How	Establish Social Safety Networks	I only meet constituents in public places. I use a peer walking buddy. I rely on older male allies in shared spaces. I share my location with loved ones.
Knowing Your Loved Ones Are Protected	Protect Home and Loved Ones	I installed video cameras at my home. I instructed my kids to use aliases online. I don't post my children's photos. I told my kids to stay off my social media. I removed legislative tags from my car. I installed cameras and a fence around my home. I told my family not to disclose my schedule.
	Manage Digital and Public Exposure	I don't post my exact location on social media. I limit comments or use bulletin boards with no replies. I removed bumper stickers and license plates that identify me. I hide my legislative identity in public. I stay off social media when I can. I mute accounts for mental health. I broadcast but don't engage. I block and unblock people so they need to re-request to follow me.

II. Responsive Strategies: Knowing What The Situation Is And Who To Reach Out To

When women legislators face harassment or threats, their immediate responses follow a surprisingly consistent algorithm of assessment, documentation, and strategic communication. These responsive strategies provide comfort through knowing what the situation requires and who to turn to for different types of support. The findings reveal five distinct dimensions of responsive action, each addressing different aspects of threat management while maintaining political effectiveness.

1. Knowing What Deserves Your Energy

The initial assessment provides comfort through knowing how to distinguish between different types of hostile encounters and respond proportionally. Legislators have developed sophisticated frameworks for categorizing threats that help them avoid both under-responding to serious situations and over-responding to manageable ones. A West Virginia senator articulates this crucial distinction: "If they're mad, how does that email look like? Oh, that's just like I can't believe that you supported this legislation. This is really terrible, and you're hurting families. I will absolutely respond." However, she draws a firm line at personal attacks: "The people who are crazy and calling you names, I don't respond to."

Legislators have developed clear criteria for when situations cross from manageable harassment into reportable threats. Specificity emerges as the primary factor distinguishing serious threats from general hostility. A Washington senator explains: "I think if it was a direct threat with specifics... if there's a direct threat which has specifics, that's a huge concern. Where they point someone out, and they know something personal. To me, that's huge. So someone says, I'm gonna come get you at your home. That's serious." A West Virginia senator emphasizes how personal details elevate threat levels: "Specifically say I know where you live. I know who your children are. I'm going to be making you pay. That's different. That's not just calling you names or making this idle threat."

Physical proximity and criminal background provide additional clear escalation triggers. A Virginia representative identifies her key threshold: "I think if they showed up at my home." Criminal history significantly influences assessment, as a Florida representative notes: "If we see that this person also has a criminal background, like the guy who came to my house had a criminal background... you can't ignore track records, and this person was incarcerated because they have a [domestic violence] case, or had a weapon, you also have to be proactive and report that."

Understanding perpetrator motivations provides additional comfort in determining appropriate response levels. A Massachusetts representative explains how learning about her stalker's condition helped de-escalate the situation: "I think the guy who stalked me—once we found out he had traumatic brain injury, that really helped de-escalate the situation. Because I got a sense that he really didn't know what he was doing. He almost felt harmless because I knew that he was just really trying to get my attention."

Multiple legislators describe ignoring what they characterize as "pathetic" threats or social media trolling while engaging with substantive criticism. A Wisconsin representative advises colleagues: "Look, if they're just being a jerk, ignore them right? If it's just plain old, come online and be a jerk. And you know, whatever make fun of your clothing that you wore when you introduced a bill, or whatever it is. Ignore them. Don't give them the time of day."

Professional experience provides comfort through knowing how to assess situations based on past training. An Ohio representative describes trusting her instincts during door-to-door campaigning: "There was this door at the end of a block. The way to get into the door was all the way around this huge set of shrubs that fully block the door from the street view. I just left the paper in the mailbox, like I'm just not going to go do that. So I trust my instinct on that."

The comfort extends to knowing when and how to use platform controls effectively. A New Hampshire representative describes simply blocking problematic users: "And I just blocked that person from the page from that page and then unblock them so they have to request to refollow me again." A North Carolina representative explains the strategic use of muting functions

when complete blocking isn't feasible: "When it's online, there's really not a lot we can do because of the First Amendment. We really can't, unless it really gets to the point where it seems like a very targeted threat. We really can't block people. So what I will do in certain instances where I can, I'll just mute them."

2. Knowing How to Build Your Case

Creating systematic records of threatening encounters provides comfort through knowing you're building a comprehensive case should escalation become necessary. Legislators have developed quick-thinking documentation strategies using available technology. A Virginia representative recounts how her staff member captured evidence of a direct threat: "He was such an astute young man. He turned his phone on. And he managed to get the video on and it really helped." The staff member successfully recorded individuals stating that the senator was "on our hit list," providing concrete evidence for law enforcement action.

Legislators consistently emphasize maintaining systematic documentation, even when they choose not to escalate immediately. A Florida representative explains their comprehensive approach: "We do keep our own records of all these interactions internally. And then if it does hit a threshold where we feel like we need to report to law enforcement, we definitely will." The comfort comes from knowing you're building a paper trail that demonstrates patterns and escalation over time.

An "I told you so" mentality drives much of this record-keeping behavior, providing psychological comfort through preparedness. A Kansas representative explicitly states: "I think it's important to be on the record should something happen later, right? Like we warned you." This documentation serves both protective and institutional accountability functions, providing comfort through knowing you've established a clear record of problems and requested solutions.

Professional experience informs systematic incident documentation approaches. A New Hampshire representative draws from her work at a homeless shelter to highlight the importance of pattern recognition: "Part of why that's so important is, maybe this isn't terrible

right? Maybe this doesn't rise to the level of needing to leave, or something like that, but it also highlights the pattern." She advocates for improved technological solutions that would empower legislators to maintain comprehensive records while reporting through official channels.

Evidence gathering sometimes reveals concerning patterns about persistent harassers. A West Virginia delegate describes discovering the extent of blocked messages: "When I pulled his number up it was like 20 text messages that I had, you know, because it doesn't come to your phone when you block them." This accumulation of evidence provides both documentation of escalation and validation that blocking decisions were appropriate.

3. Knowing Who Has Expertise

Accessing professional guidance through trusted channels provides comfort through knowing you can get expert advice without formal escalation. A Wisconsin representative describes seeking guidance through institutional connections: "I have occasionally looked for advice from our Attorney General's office just because they have folks who I can trust to have the right expertise to provide some thoughts or guidance." The comfort lies in knowing there are knowledgeable professionals available for consultation.

Some legislators benefit from family members with relevant government experience. A Montana representative describes accessing expertise through family connections: "Both my parents worked in state government, so they help support me. My dad was a bureau chief... So that's somewhat helpful, and sometimes he still has enough connections where he can reach out to people and get answers, which is good." This provides comfort through knowing you have access to institutional knowledge and networks.

Professional background significantly influences assessment capabilities and provides comfort through relevant experience. A Massachusetts representative notes: "I was a lawyer prior to getting elected. I did a lot of work in the space of civil rights. I represented a lot of survivors of domestic violence. I've gotten threats like this from abusers in the past, so I feel like I have fortitude in a sense. Not that I wasn't triggered by it, but I feel like I had mechanisms to

deal with it." The comfort comes from knowing your professional training applies to your current situation.

Peer consultation networks offer both practical advice and pattern recognition. A Wisconsin representative describes the value of colleague conversations: "Sometimes you find out that somebody else just had a similar situation. Sometimes you find out that that individual who has been harassing somebody has actually harassed three other people—things that we don't know, unless we have conversations with each other."

Expertise in self-defense can be especially effective as a response to hostile behavior, although it need not be limited to providing physical training. Lauren Taylor of Defend Yourself, an organization that works to help legislators "prevent, interrupt, and heal from harassment, abuse, and assault," explains: "you know, workplace, harassment, etc., most of those things don't call for a physical response. That's not how you protect yourself in those situations. So, given that's the vast majority [of incidents], you have to be able to have a verbal response. So, mostly we teach boundary setting and assertiveness. We also teach de-escalation… because if you address [these incidents], you have a chance of preventing them from escalating into the things that do require [self-defense]." Comfort in this case comes from knowing that you have the tools to handle a range of situations, up to and including physical altercation.

De-escalation was a strategy that came up in a number of our expert interviews. Doug Noll, author of the book, *De-Escalate: How to Calm An Angry Person in 90 Seconds or Less,* characterized his de-escalation strategy as rooted in "affect labeling, [which is] really a form of emotional validation." This works "because when somebody feels validated and heard–I call it listening other people into existence–the need for vengeance goes away… we're all hardwired to calm down when we're heard." The key to this form of de-escalation is verbalizing the emotions that others seem to be expressing, giving them a more tangible form and inviting interlocutors to reflect and to communicate *why* they feel this way instead of simply *that* they are frustrated.

Samatha Koshiol-Wright from security organization Sequeerity, also emphasized that de-escalation is "one of our biggest recommendations." She went on to explain: "We do things rooted in de-escalation and rooted in harm reduction. And it's very people first, you know. I took [dialectical behavioral therapy] when I was in my early twenties, and that is all about interpersonal skills, mindfulness and emotional regulation." Her approach to de-escalation isn't just about recognizing the emotional state of others, but being conscientious of one's own status as well: "Legislators might be workaholics, they want to push through. They want to keep going. They want to keep this engagement, but knowing when to take a break is super, super critical, because if you don't allow yourself that then you run the risk of escalating something yourself, which is so much worse for us, you know, so much worse for our brain. So knowing when you need to disengage and then having some tips and tricks in your toolbox that you can pull out when you are publicly engaging with people [can be helpful]." A simple but effective trick that she shared was to carry a comforting object (a smooth stone, a fidget toy, etc.) that can be inconspicuously touched in stressful circumstances. This can also serve as a habitual reminder to engage in emotional monitoring and regulation.

Conflict resolution and knowing when to pursue mediation are other sorely needed sources of expertise. Daniel Orth from the National Conflict Resolution Center (NCRC) has worked with legislators and their staff to prepare them for conflict, "especially in these extremely heated, divisive moments of constituents confronting officials, constituents engaging with their staff, you know, being confrontational." He asks them "How can you, as a chief of staff, or as an elected official, you know, help to deescalate that tense situation? How can you help to acknowledge where the person is coming from? How can you potentially help to clarify?" He also highlighted the challenge of defusing or redirecting their constituent's anger without appearing dismissive or blaming others, a tension which sits at the heart of many legislators' competing imperatives to sincerely listen to constituents' grievances while also maintaining a baseline level of well-being.

Shaphan Roberts, senior director and adjunct professor at the Straus Institute for Dispute Resolution at Pepperdine University, who

specializes in mediation and helping public officials navigate difficult conversations, expanded on this point and offered some of his own advice. He provided an example of the kind of dialogue he recommends to legislators dealing with hostile constituents: "[Legislators can say] 'I recognize the pain. What pain must you be in to come to a public place and have this conversation with me, to come and talk to me like this. You must be suffering in some way. I'd love to understand more about what you're frustrated with. Why are you frustrated? I wanna understand. And I want to tell you, if you're open to it, my intention behind creating this law or my intention behind what I was hoping to accomplish. But clearly we missed the mark, and I want to hear [how].'"

Knowing how to initiate conversations and pre-empt aggression through understanding can be a significant source of comfort and confidence that, regardless of the outcome, you've done your best to be a sympathetic representative. In addition, these examples all illustrate how experts draw on a breadth of knowledge across multiple disciplines, including but not limited to psychology, social work, communication research, and law. The comfort in seeking expert advice comes from knowing you're not alone and that collective intelligence can reveal important patterns.

4. Knowing It Has Go Through The Formal Channels

Understanding escalation pathways provides comfort through knowing exactly who to contact when threats cross reportable thresholds. Different states have developed distinct security infrastructures that provide clear channels for formal response. A Colorado senator explains their streamlined system: "We have a legislative liaison for Colorado State Patrol, who we reach out to when we get emails and fraud and threats. Everything goes through the State Patrol."

Assessment protocols help legislators know when and how to engage formal security systems. A Washington representative describes her protocol for legislative disruptions: "If I am in the legislature, in a legislative building and if we're talking about any kind of disruption I call the house security and they assess the situation, and they will make the determination around

calling out State Patrol." The comfort lies in knowing the decision-making process and who bears responsibility for escalation decisions.

Gut instinct plays an important role in knowing when to escalate, though legislators acknowledge this isn't always precise. A Wisconsin representative explains: "My staff and I have talked in the past about sort of when it rises to the level of engaging somebody else right? And you know, and in my mind there's a little bit of a gut check, right? I like to think that we know when it just doesn't feel right now. That's probably not the best or most accurate way to discern. But you know, when something feels like it's more, that's a good time to engage with our Capitol police."

Multiple contact options ensure redundancy in formal response systems. A West Virginia senator explains their comprehensive approach: "I feel a threat related to my job, I will tell the Capitol police—they're in charge of our safety, no matter whether we're in session or not. Any threat that I feel is my job, I tell them, and then I have a great county sheriff who's a good friend of mine. If I have any other concerns out there in the general public back home he's really fantastic." The comfort comes from knowing there are multiple formal channels available and understanding which situations call for which type of response.

5. Knowing Who Can Comfort You

Immediate support networks provide comfort through knowing exactly who to call in crisis moments. A California senator describes her instinctive response hierarchy: "If something doesn't feel right, I always go to my Chief [of Staff]. It's my first call for anything. If I feel like something's wrong or I feel unsafe, I go straight to my chief to figure it out." She identifies her core support team: "My wife is first[...] and then my chief."

Family support provides both emotional comfort and practical consultation, though it can create complex protective calculations. A West Virginia senator describes her immediate family notification process: "Obviously, in that circumstance the senators who showed it to me were the first ones—I was like, oh, my goodness! I can't believe that. Of course I'm gonna tell my husband." However, some legislators make painful

decisions to protect family members. A Michigan representative recalls: "When the threats were really bad, I would tell my husband to stay away from me because if they're gonna shoot me, I didn't want them to kill us both."

Peer support networks provide both practical advice and emotional validation. A Wisconsin representative describes colleague support: "A lot of it is just one-on-one personal support. Right? Sometimes that's just somebody to listen to and commiserate with. A lot of times talking those things through together, knowing you're not alone can just be helpful." The comfort comes from knowing colleagues understand the unique pressures of the role and can provide relevant guidance.

Identity-based connections offer particularly deep understanding and support. A Vermont representative finds particular solace in connecting with other women of color: "The person that I've shared the most with in common about this stuff is [another legislator], who's the only Black female that we have in either chamber. I feel like I don't even have to explain. I'm like, what is this shit? Like people try to be so politically correct in this state, and that's why they're like, we don't want a police presence at the door. And I'm like, the people of color actually want it. Like we want something... why don't you ask us?" This provides comfort through knowing someone truly understands your specific vulnerabilities and experiences.

Active colleague intervention during confrontational moments provides immediate protection and validation. A California senator describes how colleagues intervened during personal attacks: "This year I had legislation going through the health committee and people came in and were very personally attacking myself. [Another senator] had to interrupt them and say, stop attacking our colleagues—you can speak on what you feel about the bill, but you can't do these personal attacks on them." Such interventions provide comfort through knowing colleagues will actively defend you and establish boundaries on unacceptable behavior.

Stephanie Gabriela Lopez, executive director of Latinas Represent, also spoke about how: "A lot of times Latinas come to us once they feel like they're kind of at the end of their rope, like maybe it's their first term. Maybe they feel like it's going to be their last term, because these institutions were not created by us or for us, so it can be very difficult to navigate the space and feel like you're either just the only one or all of the microaggressions, the security concerns, like all of those things that come along with it."

Her organization recommends and supports "building community so that they feel less alone, because I feel like when you are in a silo, and when you think you're the only one that's going through this, you're the only one that's being harassed… we have to create a safety cone where people feel like someone has their back. And even if it's hard for them to ask for help, which can be true for a lot of us as women as Latinas, just knowing that there's a community out there, I think, is really helpful." One way that Latinas Represent has supported community building is by making a closed social media group for alumni of their leadership program, offering them opportunities to share posts exclusively with other members and to connect with one another one-on-one through direct messages (DMs), providing a secure way to seek comfort among peers with similar experiences.
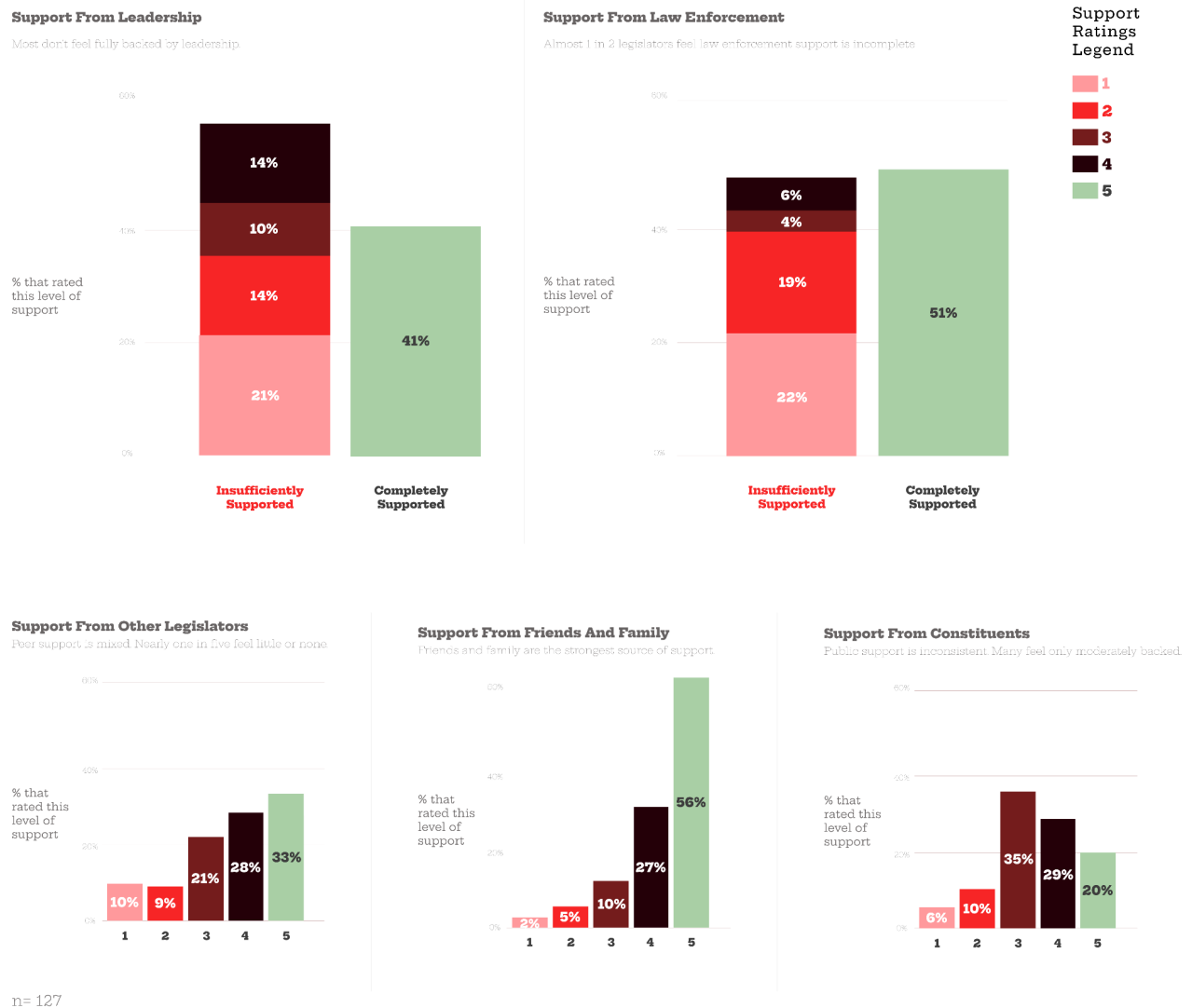
Figure 11: Support experienced by legislators from different groups.

Other sources of comfort include organizations that offer call-in or text-in helplines. These programs help legislators to describe their situation, plan for the immediate future, and establish who to contact next and how to do so, providing comfort in knowing that there is a clear course of action for them to take. Helplines also provide emotional support, lending a sympathetic ear in times of crisis and providing validation without fear of ostracization. As Layla Zaidane from Future Caucus put it, "Sometimes it's just to have peers understand what you're going through, [that] is enough." In addition to helplines that specialized in safety for public officials or legislators in particular, there are a number of county, state, and national lines that can provide support in crisis (the 24 Hour Crisis Line one example from Washington State).[12]

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[12] Crisis Connections. "24-Hour Crisis Line.".
https://www.crisisconnections.org/24-hour-crisis-line/.

Figure 12: Responsive strategies used by legislators.

Responsive Strategies: Practical measures for when an incident of harm happens.		
Need Theme	**Actionable Strategy**	**In Her Voice**
Knowing What Deserves Your Energy	Manage Digital Boundaries	I blocked online harassers. I took my Facebook page offline due to harassment. I respond to emails politely. I won't engage in name-calling. I ignore social media trolls. I temporarily stopped using social media.
	Strategic Disengagement	I walked away from aggressive people. I backed off from a very unsafe verbal assault. I go silent when I need a break. I ignored name-calling. I ignored pathetic threats. I decide when I will respond to angry emails. I only respond to reasonable criticisms. I won't respond to every threat.
	Practice De-escalation and Communication	I know how to calm people down. I de-escalate angry situations. I argue with passion, not anger. I welcome disagreement. I will talk about policy but not personal attacks.
	Calibrate Threats to Conserve Energy	I'm not concerned about people just spouting off on Facebook. Online threats feel less threatening. Political opposition doesn't feel threatening. Remote threats feel less scary. The majority of threats don't scare me. I feel safer because the attacks are about my work, not who I am as a woman. Everyone has different comfort levels, and that's okay. Each person decides for themselves what makes them feel safe.
	Learn From Experience	I didn't take stalking as seriously as I should have. I now know not to ignore specific threats. I've learned that even vague threats should be taken seriously.
Knowing How to Build Your Case	Document and Preserve Evidence	I documented threats for the record. I maintain an internal record of suspicious things. I report incidents so I can say "I told you so." I caught a death threat on camera.
	Trust Instincts and Intuition	I trust my gut about what is a threat. I avoid weird hidden houses when campaigning. I trust my instinct. I retreated from unsafe situations.
	Understand the Bigger Picture	I reminded myself that understanding the cause of threats is important. I understand this is serious. I understand we don't report everything.
Knowing Who Has Expertise	Seek Advice from Trusted Peers	I got support from other women of color. I listened to colleagues who've experienced harassment. I discussed emails with colleagues. I leaned on a male ally.
Knowing It Has to Go Through the Formal Channels	Report and Escalate Threats	I reported to Capitol Police. I contacted the sheriff or state patrol. I reported to the State Attorney General after doxxing. I filed police reports after threats. I used the panic button in my office. I escalated threats to party leadership. I notified the sergeant at arms. I alerted caucus communications staff. I submitted a stern letter to remove him. I asked police for home surveillance. I requested a police escort to my car.
	Leverage Legal Channels	I filed a restraining order. I forward all emails to my attorney. I turned to the legal department. I flagged Facebook threats to security.
	Protect Home and Loved Ones	I told my husband to lay low. I told my team to work remotely during threats. I alerted my family and my child's school. I told my husband to stay away from me.
Knowing Who Can Comfort You	Draw Emotional Comfort from Close People	I leaned on my husband. I turn to my partner. I turn to my chosen family. I turn to my siblings. I turn to my woman legislator friend. I turn to colleagues.

III.   Restorative Strategies: Knowing What You Need to Come Back to Balance

Restorative strategies and programs are aimed at returning the legislator to a baseline state of well-being and helping them to recover from the harm they have incurred. These approaches encompass reset mechanisms, rejuvenation practices, and nurturing relationships that help women feel hopeful, supported, and loved while regaining their balance after facing threats or harassment. The findings reveal four distinct dimensions of restoration, each addressing different aspects of recovery while maintaining the resilience necessary for continued public service, and choosing to walk away if it becomes unbearable.

On the organizational side of things, restorative support prioritizes a return to long-term well-being for legislators, often by providing concrete assistance like referrals for therapy and safe spaces for dialogue. This approach tends to be holistic and, while not disregarding physical safety, tries to incorporate attention to multiple dimensions of wellness. Restorative Democracy is one such organization leading the way in making sure that legislators are not just equipped to handle challenging situations and threats to their safety, but also to heal from them. Raquel Castaneda-Lopez put it like this: "Your vessel is one thing, but like your spirit and your soul, and your ability to show up as you and thrive is the main focus. And so I think the restorative practices are built in and embedded throughout our curriculum." Women's Democracy Lab is another organization that puts emphasis on building emotional resilience. They also help women legislators of color to connect with one another and foster well-being by organizing events like a "women in power retreat."

1.   Knowing Who Is in Your Nurturing Circle

Creating and maintaining trusted networks provides comfort through knowing you have reliable emotional support when facing political stress and harm. These networks serve both preventive and restorative functions, offering safe spaces for vulnerability and authentic connection. A Kansas representative describes joining the "Sunflower Sisters," a selective group of Democratic women from her county who formed during COVID when they felt unsupported by colleagues: "They created just this little group within themselves called the Sunflower Sisters, and they have a text thread, and they are just like circle of trust, kind of people where you can ask them questions." The group's exclusivity is intentional, providing comfort through knowing the network's integrity is protected: "There are other ones from my county that would like in. And we're like, no, no, thank you, because they were some of the ones who weren't helping them to begin with."

Similar peer networks appear across states, providing comfort through consistent availability and shared understanding. A Montana representative maintains a group text with two other female legislators, including one whose husband is a retired sheriff, providing both emotional support and security expertise: "We have a group text that we're on all the time." The comfort lies in knowing this support is continuously accessible and combines emotional care with practical expertise.

One-on-one relationships within these networks provide additional comfort through knowing specific individuals are committed to your daily wellbeing and accountability. A Kansas representative describes her "work husband," a Democratic colleague who provides both practical support and emotional care: "He's kind of like my work husband, you know, like I'm always making him drink his water and your medicine, and he's like, you don't need that sugar. You're diabetic. And so, you know, it's nice to have somebody that kind of has my back." The physical presence provides additional comfort: "He said physically, yes, there, you know, that's good."

A Maryland delegate developed a peer walking buddy system for situations that make her uncomfortable, providing comfort through knowing she doesn't have to face potentially threatening situations alone: "Any situation that I felt uncomfortable with, then, yes." This includes constituent meetings and walking alone:

"Sometimes in Annapolis, if I'm uncomfortable walking home, we try to make sure people aren't walking alone. There are people that you can call that will have relationships with, that will have your back if you call them, no matter what time."

The selectivity evident in many support networks reflects the reality that restoration requires carefully calibrated trust. A Kansas representative explains: "In politics you just can't trust very many people, even on your side," highlighting why restoration often depends on carefully chosen relationships rather than broader institutional support. The comfort comes from knowing your circle is composed of people who have proven their reliability and care.

Some legislators struggle to identify clear support networks, revealing gaps in restorative resources. A West Virginia delegate acknowledges: "If something were to happen honestly, I would call my minority chair... Outside of that I can't give you a name that I will call next, you know, because I don't know the particulars or the individuals." This highlights the vulnerability that comes from lacking established support systems and the comfort that flows from knowing exactly who to turn to in crisis.

2. Knowing What You Need to Recover and Reset

Understanding your personal restoration requirements and having systematic approaches provides comfort through knowing how to return to wellness after harm. A Virginia delegate incorporates "pod mapping" into safety training for elected women, using an exercise developed by the Bay Area Transformative Justice Collective that guides state legislators through identifying people in their orbit who can provide support during abuse or harm: "It is safety planning, but it's like through a lens of your own emotional resilience and fortitude, and then helping folks identify where those resources are already in their network." This approach provides comfort through knowing you have a structured method for understanding and accessing your support ecosystem.

An Indiana representative offers a detailed framework for understanding restorative needs, drawing from her professional background: "You are well when you are balanced. I have an unfair advantage because I know when I am out of balance because that is what I do for a living." She identifies specific practices that provide comfort through their proven effectiveness: "Appreciating the mundane like making nutritious dinner for family, being awake and around when kids are waking up and going to school so they are not rushed" serves restorative functions.

Individual practices that facilitate return to baseline wellness provide comfort through knowing what specifically works for your restoration needs. The Indiana representative emphasizes the importance of returning to routine activities that ground state legislators in their pre-political identities: "Pushing the pause on intellectual fatigue" becomes necessary when the demands of legislative work overwhelm mental resources. She advocates for being "selfish and singular about your needs, about your bandwidth and ability to interact with others" during restoration periods, providing comfort through knowing it's acceptable to prioritize personal recovery.

The concept of "being normal" emerges as a crucial restoration practice. The Indiana representative notes: "Sometimes the restorative break is too short because you are go go go. But I need to 'be normal,'" highlighting how restoration often means temporarily stepping away from the hypervigilant state required for navigating political threats. The comfort lies in knowing you can return to routine activities without the overlay of political considerations.

A California senator keeps her restoration approach simple, providing comfort through knowing reliable stress relief methods: turning to "friends, if I need to distress." The emphasis on existing friendships outside politics provides crucial counterbalance to the intensity of legislative work, offering comfort through connections that predate and exist independently of political identity.

Expert interviewees also described restorative processes as requiring one to recognize and communicate needs. Describing the work that Restorative Democracy does, Raquel Castaneda-Lopez told us: "[It's] about, how do we help you as a person? So, it's having an attorney talk to you about estate planning and having a financial talk to you about like, what's your financial plan? And, you know, like, do you have a

budget, you as a person, so legal support, financial support, looking at your social network, who exists in the ecosystem… that's gonna make sure you eat, wash laundry, and you know, take a shower... all the basic things that we don't think about but fall by the wayside" Instead of expecting state legislators to compartmentalize and maintain strict boundaries between the personal and the professional, they recognize the importance of comprehensive support that helps the state legislator identify their needs as a whole person, for whom being a lawmaker is just one part of their identity.

Shaphan Roberts (Pepperdine University) echoes these sentiments: "The conversation I wanted to have is self care, because when you're dealing with the public, and you're dealing with the acrimony, then it's gonna show up in other places. So you want to make sure that you have a decompression [space], a place to, you know, do the Yoga, or do whatever the spiritual practice is, or whatever the thing is to let go of the stress that you're taking on."

The comfort in understanding your recovery needs lies in knowing you have reliable methods for recognizing when restoration is necessary, specific strategies for achieving it, and individual practices that work for your unique requirements, rather than leaving recovery to chance or crisis response.

3. Knowing Who You Are and Why You're Here

Drawing on personal strength and remembering fundamental purpose provides comfort through knowing your identity transcends the threats you face. This dimension encompasses both projecting strength as protection and returning to core motivations for public service when harm threatens to derail commitment to the work.

Projecting confidence and strength serves both protective and restorative functions. An Ohio senator emphasizes the importance of mindset: "I just think that you've got to be able to have confidence and stand up for yourself and not be lurking and waiting for someone to attack you. I think that's a very terrible way to go through life."

Personal history and family background provide foundational strength. An Ohio senator notes: "I was raised by two very strong people. So

I guess that has a lot to do with it." A West Virginia senator explains her approach to harassment: "I don't respond to bullying... Since I was a little girl... you are not gonna bully me into backing down." The comfort comes from knowing your fundamental character and upbringing provide resources for resilience.

Remembering the larger purpose of the work provides crucial restoration when threats make the personal cost feel overwhelming. A Michigan representative explains what sustains her through difficult periods: "What makes it better for me is to know that I made a difference. That's the only thing I can look forward to." She describes her motivation in mentoring younger Black women state legislators: "Those little eyes are looking at them just like they are looking at me... maybe that's the thing that helps me get through this... I owe them the same thing, and those little sisters over there I gotta help them get there. They're gonna go, and it's gonna hurt. It's gonna hurt them, but they'll make it."

The comfort in purpose-driven resilience lies in knowing that the work transcends personal safety concerns and connects to larger generational change. A Kansas representative reflects on why she couldn't turn down her appointment as a state legislator: "When you work hard to impact policy and then you get a chance to make policy, I would lose all credibility about complaining if I pass up the chance to be the one doing work, especially when nobody else stepped up that would do as good a job."

Some state legislators find comfort in refusing to be silenced in systems that harm women. An Ohio representative emphasizes: "If we are quiet about it, we are complicit... I'm not going to be shy about that." The comfort lies in knowing that speaking out, despite personal risk, aligns with fundamental values about protection and advocacy.

4. Knowing When It's Okay to Walk Away

Some state legislators find comfort in knowing that choosing to leave office when the personal costs become overwhelming is a valid and courageous decision. A New Jersey assemblywoman reflects on her decision not to seek reelection: "I know it's so important to so many people and that the government makes

extremely significant decisions that impact all of our lives... I just think about the balance of it. And I think if it was just the legislative work, I could push through. But being in my district, that's so borderline, and I know, the campaign would be so grueling, and I don't think that my party really understands how to support me in a campaign that I just felt like, I couldn't be alone in that as well. It was too much."

The comfort lies in recognizing that self-preservation and family protection are legitimate reasons to step back from public service. A Michigan representative describes the isolation that led to her decision: "I felt so

diminished... The Democrats said, we don't think you're gonna win, so we're not putting any money into your race... I'll never run again." Her reflection captures the toll: "Every step of the way, I faced hardships... I can tell you at least once a month, there's a big incident."

Understanding that leaving office doesn't negate the impact already made provides additional comfort. The New Jersey state legislator notes: "I think why I do it or why I have done it is because I know it's so important... people, like me, women and people of color are not represented." The comfort comes from knowing you contributed during your time in service, even if continuing becomes unsustainable.

Figure 13: Restorative strategies used by legislators.

Restorative Strategies: Measures for after an incident of harm happens.		
Need Theme	**Actionable Strategy**	**In Her Voice**
Knowing Who Is in Your Nurturing Circle	Talk to People Who Get It	I stay connected to a small group of women legislators who have my back no matter what. I de-stress by venting with my group chat of three close colleagues after hard days. I rely on my "work husband" and a few trusted peers to help me navigate tough situations. I use secure chat apps when we're talking about sensitive safety issues. I have a space where I feel seen and can process freely. I go to a Bible study group which gives me a space where I feel seen for who I am. I processed what happened by talking with my staff and my family.
Knowing What You Need to Recover and Reset	Step Back and Reset	I took time offline after I was threatened because I needed to regroup and feel safe. I limited my public events for a while after the incident—it felt necessary for my safety. Sometimes just making dinner, being there when my kids wake up—that's what restores me. I've learned to notice when I'm off balance—and that's when I know it's time to pause. I need time to step away from the constant problem-solving and just feel human again. Even a short break can help me reset—just doing something ordinary without thinking about politics. Sometimes I have to be unapologetically selfish about my time and energy, because no one else will be.
Knowing Who You Are and Why You're Here	Hold Onto Purpose and Strength	I want to know I made a difference—it's what keeps me going. My parents raised me to be a strong woman, I carry that with me. I've had to face fear head on and I refuse to back down. I've learned to laugh through some of the chaos—it's one of my ways to survive. People say "don't be so sensitive," but I know caring is a strength, not a weakness. I've seen women go along to get along, I'm not doing that when it comes to safety.

Recommendations and Guiding Principles

Our report begins with the premise that political violence in the United States is not a distant concern, but a patterned phenomenon that is not likely to subside in the near future. Far from shying away from this fact, we forefront it in order to also illuminate related and reinforcing trends that seriously undermine democratic institutions. That is, we put a spotlight on *all* of the harms that state legislators face simply in virtue of occupying public office, extending our collective vision to include multiple ways in which state legislators suffer injury to their well-being. At the same time, we also narrow our focus to the experience of women state legislators, especially those with intersecting identities that have been and continue to be unprotected by the very institutions they now work within. Without their presence in the statehouse, their substantive participation in lawmaking processes, their *voices* as individuals and advocates for those they represent, there is little prospect for inclusive democratic governance; that is, any real democratic governance at all.

Well-being rests at the center of our argument because state legislators are not just public servants. They are not mere vessels for the public will, dutifully carrying out their responsibilities and stoically bearing the brunt of citizen grievances. They are people with needs, preferences, values, and aspirations. They have families and friends who miss them sorely while they are away during the legislative session. Unfortunately, they also suffer like any other human being, often in enduring and even invisible ways as they put their lives on hold– and sometimes on the line–to make their states better places to live. When living as a state legislator becomes deeply unsatisfying, even dangerous, we should expect representatives to question whether the work continues to be worth the sacrifice. Furthermore, when the estimated prospects of future well-being are grim, few could be blamed for taking what may appear to be the only option available to them: suppression, silence, or even exit from the legislature.

The decision to remain and fight the good fight or to withdraw from public life is not just a personal one, but one that affects all who would consider running for office. This is the true and insidious purpose of political violence: not just to remove a *specific* person, but a whole class of persons from access to the levers of power. If that were not abhorrent enough, the true damage constitutes near-total erasure when the threat of harm eliminates the sense that holding political office is even a reasonable possibility. Thankfully, courageous women have persisted despite a long history in the United States of disenfranchising them, but it is an undue burden and indeed a deep injustice to ask them to endure more than their male counterparts (and for less reward) just to have a seat at the table.

This report is intended to amplify the voices of the women currently carrying these burdens, to listen to their experiences and learn from them, and to endeavor through shared knowledge to better their lives and the lives of their successors. We have developed our well-being framework to be as comprehensive as possible, while also allowing room to change as new stories are heard and unrecognized needs identified. Practically speaking, this means understanding the incidents that threaten women state legislators' well-being, the kinds of harm they endure that take them away from a baseline sense of well-being, and realistic options that exist (or could exist) for them to feel secure in their well-being without leaving office.

Toward this end, our approach brings together individual strategies and to summarize what seems to work right now, what could work with continued effort and resources, and what still needs to be done. We also recognize that, while lasting legislative solutions would be ideal, present political circumstances make this difficult if not impossible in many states. With this challenge in mind, we offer the following guiding principles for state legislators as a general set of recommendations to be paired with more specific advice and organizational support discussed in previous sections.

Guiding Principles:

Our recommendations, grounded in the experiences of state legislators and the knowledge of experts in the field, focus on four key areas:

Sow the seeds for policy change

Access available resources

Find comfort in community

Explore alternative options

We expand upon each principle in the sections that follow.

Sow the Seeds for Policy Change

Despite the ongoing difficulty of passing legislation, especially in states with a highly polarized political climate, it should still remain an enduring goal to secure institutional recognition, protections, and funding to promote state legislator safety. This may take the form of actual passage of bills, but may also be implemented through amending policies and procedures governing statehouse conduct. Clear and well-communicated protocols in the face of threats are of paramount importance and should continue to be a high priority for lawmakers. This process, however, can often take years, even under favorable circumstances, and may require expending precious political capital to accomplish.

Our first recommendation, then, is to start now on efforts to identify key policy changes that can be formally implemented, either as law or specified protocol. Excellent work on this front has been done by the Brennan Center for Justice in their 2024 report[13], as well as by the Bridging Divides Initiative in their report on political violence and resilience trends from 2024[14]. As a brief summary of their suggestions, Both the Brennan Center for Justice and the Bridging

Divides Initiative suggest that states should provide adequate safety training and resources and enhance monitoring and information-sharing about conflict actors. The Brennan Center also recommends that states should regulate open and concealed carry of firearms in locations where officeholders interact with the public, that states should permit candidates to restrict the carry of firearms at public events. Finally, they suggest updating campaign finance laws to permit candidate and party spending to go to legitimate security expenses, a cause which the Vote Mama Foundation has taken the lead on in an effort to advocate for these updates in all 50 states with their Campaign Funds for Security project.[15]

While these policy recommendations are hardly radical, each has various hurdles to implementation that vary from state to state. In the meanwhile, lawmakers do have alternatives to improve safety for themselves and colleagues that do not depend upon the passage of state legislation. We discuss what this means below, but this first guiding principle reiterates that policy solutions should not be abandoned; rather, they should be carefully crafted, put into the legislative pipeline, and, when successful, shared as model legislation for other state contexts. In the meantime, state legislators should not rely exclusively on the prospect of institutional protections and guidance. In addition, protections that already exist should not be considered as "settled law," given that backslides are always possible.

We include this point as our first guiding principle because it sets into motion important long-term safety reforms while also imploring state legislators to take stock of their other options, especially those that meet more immediate safety needs. It also bears remembering that the likely beneficiaries of improved policy procedures are not just for the present cohort of lawmakers, but future and potential state legislators as well. Reframing this work as "for the future" is a powerful strategy, both rhetorically and normatively, and we recommend that state legislators use this to their advantage when

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[13] Ramachandran et al., *Intimidation of State and Local Officeholders.*.

[14] Bridging Divides Initiative, *Special Report: Key Political Violence and Resilience Trends from 2024* (Princeton University, January 28, 2025), https://bridgingdivides.princeton.edu/updates/2025/special-report-key-political-violence-and-resilience-trends-2024.

[15] Vote Mama Foundation, "Campaign Funds for Childcare (CFS) and Elder Care: About CFS," https://www.votemamafoundation.org/aboutcfs.

advocating for policies. Emphasizing the value for future cohorts and the importance of making elected office attractive to great candidates may qualm suspicion or criticism of such initiatives as self-serving or unnecessary.

Access Available Resources

One key finding that emerged after analysing both legislator and expert interviews was that there may be misalignments between the myriad of organizational support offerings and what legislators are aware they have access to. A commonly expressed sentiment among legislators was that a major obstacle to their ability to feel safe was a lack of funding for safety initiatives, programs, and training. While many states go through cycles of budgetary expansion and contraction, recent cuts to many federal programs have made costs an especially prohibitive constraint for legislators looking to address safety concerns with institutional support.

Our second guiding principle takes this as a point of departure and recommends legislators seek organizational support to supplement safety programs that have had funding withdrawn or denied. While it is certainly the case that non-profit organizations are similarly affected by changes in federal government spending, there remain options for legislators that come at little or no cost to them. This is particularly true of organizations that offer information or online training as their primary form of support.

What this means from a practical perspective varies depending upon the safety needs at hand. For instance, help-lines and organizations that function as communication "hubs" may not operate within the legislator's state, but their services remain accessible to out-of-state legislators all the same. There may also be services that would address the legislator's needs but which are not explicitly intended for lawmakers. In this case, it may be less about reaching out across state lines and more a matter of rethinking how to characterize the problem and searching for relevant support available but not exclusive to other professional fields. Finally, while some organizations do charge for the training they provide, legislators who find that their state is unwilling to pay for these services may be able to negotiate with an organization to provide training *as a trainer* for legislative staff, significantly reducing the cost of an ongoing need by integrating it into a staff position or role.

While this suggestion likely takes some legwork on the part of legislators (or their staff), the effort need not involve cold-calling organizations or starting a search from scratch. One role that we can play as researchers in this area is collecting, maintaining, and sharing lists of organizational offerings with information about cost, access requirements, and the needs they are equipped to address. In addition, this is one of many reasons for legislators to develop relationships with their colleagues in other states, as they may have received help from local organizations that are not at capacity and who are happy to lend underutilized resources.

We also hope to make it less difficult for legislators to find organizational resources. In the table below, for example, we briefly list and summarize the kinds of programs and services our expert interviewees described for us, either as a representative of an organization that does this work or as advocates who endorse the work done by others.

Figure 14: List of organizational resources to help with interventions.

List of Organizational Resources			
Type	**Subtype**	**Description**	**Examples**
Training	Self-Defense	How to protect oneself (and/or others) during an attack	Basic martial arts training; weapons training
	Physical Security	How to recognize threats in one's immediate surroundings	Situational awareness; training event staff or community volunteers to identify threats and respond accordingly
	De-escalation/ Conflict Resolution	How to manage confrontations and conflict by reducing the emotional "temperature" in the room or finding a shared understanding	"Labeling out" emotions; understanding motivating concerns and experiences; active listening; identifying shared values or common goals
	Constructive Civic Dialogue	How to outline expectations and set up favorable environments for productive conversations with the public	Establishing codes for civic conversation; creating community guidelines; hosting collaborative norm-building exercises
	Interpersonal/Workplace Communication Skills	How to handle discriminatory or offensive remarks and respond to discomforting non-verbal cues such as staring	Setting personal and professional boundaries; effectively calling out inappropriate behavior
	Data Security and Privacy	How to limit access to private information	Knowing what data may be exposed to the public and where; establishing personal privacy boundaries; implementing best practices to limit distribution/ accessibility of data
	Secure Environment Consultation	Adapting one's environment to improve physical security	Reorganizing office space to limit exposure to risk; installing security devices like cameras or panic buttons
Service			

	Mediation	Actively facilitating conversations (with an expert present) between legislators and other parties with whom other efforts to communicate have failed	Pre-empting legal disputes with experts in arbitration; acting as a go-between when legislators and law enforcement agencies aren't on good terms
	Social Media/ Public Data Audit	Walking legislators through the process of removing or securing private information	"Scrubbing" embarrassing photographs/ videos from social media accounts; changing privacy settings; searching for old social media accounts and closing/making them private
	Call-in/ Text-in Help Lines	Providing a person to talk to about safety concerns	Planning for next steps; connecting legislators with other organizations; offering emotional support
Information	Threat Landscape	Providing up-to-date information about violence against legislators and tracking rising threats	Statistics, notable trends and incidents, individuals and hate groups that are calling for or organizing violence
	Policy Recommendations	Providing data-driven recommendations for legislators to try to implement in their state	Standardized policies, procedures, and protocols; model legislation
	Organization Referral Hub	Providing a list of organizations that specialize in various kinds of support	This report!
Restoration & Community Building	Private Social Media Groups	Creating and maintaining social media groups and inviting legislators to join them to talk about their needs and experiences	Private LinkedIn or Facebook groups; invite-only chats on secure communication platforms like Signal
	Restorative Activities	Coordinating enriching activities for legislators to participate in that help them to return to a balanced sense of well-being	Hosting get togethers in safe spaces; organizing runs/hikes/yoga sessions to encourage physical activity

	Check-ins	Having a person or team periodically check up on legislators to make sure their day-to-day needs are met	Making sure they remember to do self-sustaining things like buying groceries/doing laundry/paying bills; reminding them to incorporate self-care into their routines

Find Comfort in Community

The guiding principles thus far have an implicit message: institutions cannot entirely be relied upon to address safety needs, even when they are urgent. Even if policy change is achieved, progress is never assured to be permanent. Law enforcement agencies may be an excellent source of support, but the experiences of many women legislators often tell a very different story. Legislators will need to be proactive in their efforts to improve their safety, but we also want to stress that they need not go it alone.

In keeping with the recommendations offered by many of the experts we interviewed, developing robust community networks is one of the most fundamental and effective overall strategies for addressing safety needs. Building relationships with other legislators, whether within the same party or across the aisle, is crucially important for effectively sharing information, but it can also be a way to hedge against social harms such as isolation, loneliness, and ostracization. One legislator shared that they had been successful in making friends across the aisle by attending a weekly prayer group, exemplifying a shared values approach to bridging divides and navigating conflict. This is just one case of many that likely go unnoticed, but is somewhat remarkable in this era of hyper-partisan politics.

As mentioned above, another strategy is to foster relationships with other legislators across state lines. In some ways, the job of being a state legislator is largely parochial, but in others it is a position with striking similarities between state and even regional contexts. Beyond offering opportunities to share information about resources, other state legislators face many of the same day-to-day stressors and friendships outside of one's home state are likely to avoid the cliquiness inherent in electoral politics. Through these relationships, there is great potential for cross-pollination of ideas and developing model legislation to address issues of legislator safety.

Surely, this is no novel suggestion, and through national party events and conferences this happens naturally and without much notice. Our point here is to encourage legislators to recognize the extent to which such relationships afford opportunities beyond standard professional networking to develop supportive communities among women legislators.

Explore Alternative Options

In some ways, this culminating principle is a recapitulation in spirit of the previous three. Institutional inertia requires legislators to look beyond standard policy and lawmaking processes to meet their safety needs. Budget constraints and lack of knowledge about available resources necessitate thinking outside of the box about where cheap or free support can be found and creatively rearticulating their problems to look where they otherwise wouldn't. When institutions and law enforcement can't be relied upon, informal and profession-adjacent social networks can effectively distribute information and underutilized resources.

What exploring alternative options adds is the notion that, in addition to all of these principles, there is power and agency in ingenuity. The path to well-being is not one, but many, and it is paved by decisions to be conscientious and reflective about how far outside of baseline one is and is willing to remain. One major element of our well-being framework is the distinction between objective and perceived well-being, and this is in part due to the recognition that people, legislators included, are not always totally self-transparent. Threats to perceived safety–that is, factors that undermine confidence in future well-being– can

only ever be partially alleviated by robust and well-specified protocol. Each legislator faces different pressures, experiences harm in their own personal way, and is going to be more or less comfortable with various solutions. We have offered some of the individual strategies that our informants shared with us, as well as a variety of organizational solutions, in the hopes that legislators can pragmatically incorporate what is useful into their practices.

Finally, we add that new technological solutions and underused existing technologies should be considered and reviewed periodically. Solutions which one year seem inordinately expensive or difficult to implement may become more realistic as innovative tools are made available, often at low cost. Naturally, we advise due caution, as technologies also come with privacy concerns and the possibility of surveillance or infiltration by bad actors. It's important to carefully weigh the benefits and potential risks of implementing technological solutions, maintain best practices for privacy management and data security, and establish ethical guidelines for when and how to use them.

Concluding Remarks

Rather than offering a one-size-fits all prescription, we expect that legislators reading this report will be inspired by some strategies more than others, and that their interest in the various organizational offerings will be in part a matter of preference and familiarity. We conclude our guiding principles with encouragement to find strategies that work for you and your situation, and to regularly reflect upon what is working and what isn't. When something does work, please share it with others and extend your reach by developing a community that is able to talk openly about safety and the threats faced by legislators. Moreover, know that there is an already existing community of organizers and researchers committed to confronting harm to women legislators, and that our work is only possible because legislators have been willing to share their experiences with us for the good of those who will follow in their footsteps.

Ghosh Innovation Lab and Next Steps

The experiences documented in this report make one thing unmistakably clear: harm against women legislators is not random or rare. It is systemic, persistent, and deeply tied to the way power is negotiated in public life. While the most extreme forms of harm may generate headlines, the more routine and insidious forms such as daily insults, coordinated disinformation, social isolation, and professional sabotage are wearing down public servants who are simply trying to do their jobs.

These harms are driving women out of office, discouraging future candidates, and weakening the foundation of representative democracy. But amid the difficulty, we also found reason for cautious hope.

Women legislators are not waiting for institutions to solve this problem. They are building informal safety networks, adapting their behavior in response to threat patterns, and creating new standards of care for themselves and their communities. Their insights, instincts, and innovations are at the heart of this report. What they need now is support, infrastructure, and systems designed with their realities in mind.

When we began this work, our original goal was to build technology. But as we listened to legislators, it became clear that the problem was bigger than tools alone could solve. We discovered a critical knowledge gap. Legislators often do not know what resources are available to them, where to find trusted guidance, or how to coordinate a response when things escalate. Even when systems exist, they are scattered, outdated, or hard to access.

The solutions lie not in choosing between individual resilience and institutional reform, but in pursuing both simultaneously. Women legislators have shown remarkable creativity in protecting themselves and their colleagues, from developing buddy systems for dangerous situations to creating secure communication networks that bypass unreliable official channels. These grassroots innovations point toward what comprehensive support could look like if properly resourced and systematically implemented.

This report serves as both documentation and blueprint. It captures the current reality while illuminating a path toward change that honors women's lived experiences and builds on their existing wisdom. The strategies outlined here, whether proactive, responsive, or restorative, provide immediate tools for legislators facing harm today while laying groundwork for longer-term institutional transformation.

The goal is straightforward but revolutionary: No woman should have to choose between serving her constituents and protecting her life. Safety should not be the exception. It should be the expectation.

In response, Ghosh Innovation Lab is developing a three-pronged approach. First, we are building technology through the GRID Safety System, a secure platform for reporting incidents, tracking threats, and navigating options. Second, we are curating resources through a comprehensive Resource Hub to bring clarity, visibility, and structure to what is currently a fragmented landscape. Third, we are fostering connections and community through the Ambassadors of Safety initiative, providing training and tools to equip peer leaders to support one another.

Our next step is piloting the technology in selected states where trusted partners are ready to lead this work. These pilots will help us learn what is most effective, identify gaps, and refine our approach through lived experience.

By listening to women, designing around their needs, and building alongside them, we believe we can strengthen both individual well-being and democratic resilience. We encourage organizers to reach out to us and let us know about support they provide to help us build a more comprehensive database with all the available resources. Similarly, we invite legislators to tell us about their unmet needs so that, through collaborative effort, we can seek organizations that may be able to address them.

We began with a question about harm. We are ending with a commitment to action. Safety should not be the exception. It should be the expectation.

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Appendix

Understanding Well-Being: A Comprehensive Framework for Human Thriving

Well-being represents far more than simply feeling good in the moment or avoiding obvious problems. It encompasses a comprehensive assessment of how someone is functioning across the multiple interconnected areas that define human experience. This framework recognizes that true well-being emerges when individuals feel they are operating within an acceptable range of their personal baseline across all important life dimensions, even as these areas naturally fluctuate between moving toward and away from their ideal states.

The Six Dimensions of Well-Being

The framework identifies six distinct but interconnected dimensions that collectively determine overall well-being.

1. **Psychological well-being** forms the foundation of our internal experience, encompassing our mental and emotional states. When functioning optimally, this dimension is characterized by a generally positive effect with healthy expressions of both positive and negative emotions, stable moods that don't swing dramatically without cause, and clear thinking with sustained mental focus. Conversely, when psychological well-being is compromised, individuals experience emotional imbalances or intensely negative feelings, unpredictable mood swings, and distorted or unclear thinking patterns that interfere with daily functioning.

2. **Physical well-being** addresses our bodily health and physical experience. Strong physical well-being manifests as good overall health relative to one's age and circumstances, full utilization of physical abilities within personal limitations, and generally pleasant or neutral bodily sensations. When compromised, this dimension shows up as emerging or worsening health problems, limitations in physical capabilities, and persistent or intense physical discomfort that affects quality of life.

3. **Social well-being** examines how effectively our broader social connections function. Healthy social well-being includes sufficient ongoing social interaction to meet individual needs, satisfying positions within important social groups, and confidence that people whose opinions matter hold positive views of us. Compromised social well-being appears as unmet social interaction needs, feeling poorly positioned in important social networks, and uncertainty or concern about how others perceive us.

4. **Relational well-being** focuses specifically on our closest, most intimate relationships. When strong, this dimension provides meaningful intimate bonds with important people and reasonable confidence in the stability and health of these close relationships. When compromised, close relationships experience serious ongoing strain, important relationships deteriorate or end, and individuals worry about the well-being of those closest to them.

5. **Economic well-being** encompasses our relationship with financial resources and security. Strong economic well-being provides sufficient financial resources to meet needs and reasonable wants, security about the financial future, and a sense of control over economic circumstances. Compromised economic well-being creates struggles to meet basic needs or important goals due to financial constraints, anxiety about the economic future, and feelings of powerlessness over financial situations that limit choices across other life dimensions.

6. **Flourishing well-being** represents our sense of living a meaningful, purposeful

life. When strong, this dimension includes progress toward personally meaningful goals, active involvement in projects that feel significant, and alignment between our actual self and ideal self. When compromised, individuals fail to achieve important goals, lack meaningful projects or abandon them, and experience significant disconnection between who they are and who they want to be.

These six dimensions are monitored by what we call **perceived well-being**, which is an ongoing, mostly unconscious internal assessment of how we are doing overall. This monitoring system continuously tracks and evaluates some or all dimensions, typically becoming conscious only when someone asks "How are you doing?" or when we sense that our well-being is significantly compromised and requires deliberate reflection.

Three States of Well-Being

The framework recognizes three distinct states of well-being. The **optimal state** occurs when all dimensions function at or near their highest realistic levels for an individual. To understand this state, imagine having a "really good week"—not a fantasy scenario, but a genuinely achievable period where multiple life areas function well simultaneously. The **baseline state** represents when all dimensions meet acceptable minimum levels without being noticeably elevated. In this state, individuals would naturally respond "I'm doing well" when asked, maintaining a background sense of being "okay" that becomes noticeable mainly when disrupted. While some dimensions might operate below optimal levels, they don't cause distress. The **unwell state** occurs when one or more dimensions drop below acceptable thresholds in ways that feel seriously compromising, create noticeable deficits, and often become apparent to observant others.

Safety and Well-Being

The framework extends beyond current well-being states to examine how safety perceptions influence our overall experience. **Perceived safety** represents our sense that well-being will remain above acceptable levels in the foreseeable future.

This perception emerges from our assessment that we're unlikely to experience significant harm and that any potential harm wouldn't be severe enough to meaningfully compromise our well-being. The timeframe we consider as the "foreseeable future" varies depending on the type of potential threat and our confidence in predicting outcomes.

Perceived lack of safety occurs when we sense our well-being is at risk through three primary pathways: expecting harm (believing a reduction in well-being is likely), fearing severe consequences (even if harm seems unlikely, believing it would be devastating if it occurred), or feeling especially vulnerable (when the threatened well-being area is uniquely important, particularly fragile, or central to other life aspects).

These perceptions relate to but differ from objective conditions. **Objective safety** refers to actual conditions that protect well-being over time by reducing the likelihood of harm, including the absence of harmful factors, the presence of protective conditions and systems, and mechanisms that mitigate potential threats. **Objective lack of safety** exists when harm is genuinely likely due to high probability, high potential impact, or critical vulnerability in areas central to well-being.

Understanding Harm

Harm represents any negative influence that moves someone away from optimal well-being in one or more dimensions. Harm can be direct or indirect, immediate or delayed, intentional or unintentional, and obvious or subtle. It may immediately affect the individual or affect them through other consequences, happen now or manifest later, be deliberately caused or accidental, and be clearly apparent or difficult to recognize. Understanding harm's varied nature helps explain why threats to well-being can be complex and sometimes unexpected.

This framework provides a nuanced understanding of human well-being that acknowledges its multidimensional nature, recognizes that optimal functioning looks different for each person, and offers a sophisticated lens for assessing when someone might need support to restore their well-being to acceptable levels. By incorporating both current states and future safety

perceptions, it captures the full complexity of what it means to be truly well.

A Hypothetical Case Study in Well-Being Under Political Pressure

Note: This is a completely hypothetical example created for illustrative purposes. Any resemblance to real persons or events is purely coincidental.

Stephanie Ortanez, a 38-year-old Hispanic state legislator in Kansas, recently switched from the Republican to the Democratic party and voted in favor of expanded reproductive rights. Once known as a staunch Second Amendment advocate, her shift has made her a lightning rod for political backlash.

Optimal State (Before the Switch)

Rep. Ortanez previously enjoyed strong well-being across all six dimensions. She felt mentally clear and emotionally steady (psychological), maintained a consistent fitness routine (physical), thrived in her conservative social networks (social), had a stable marriage aligned in values (relational), felt financially secure (economic), and found purpose in defending constitutional rights (flourishing).

Compromised State (After the Switch)

Now, she faces intense harassment including threatening messages that blend sexualized violence with references to guns, public protests labeling her a baby killer, and condemnation from former allies. These pressures lead to anxiety and difficulty focusing (psychological), physical symptoms like headaches and sleep disruption (physical), social isolation from both parties (social), strain in her marriage (relational), loss of speaking income (economic), and deep questioning of her purpose (flourishing).

Safety Perceptions

Rep. Ortanez's perceived safety has sharply declined. She expects continued harassment, fears severe consequences if threats escalate, and feels vulnerable due to her visibility and political shift.

Objectively, while she has not experienced physical harm, the presence of explicit threats and heightened public hostility suggest elevated concern but not confirmed danger. Her case illustrates how perceived risk can deeply impact well-being even when actual harm has not occurred.

CONFRONTING HARM

EXPERIENCES AND STRATEGIES FROM U.S. WOMEN STATE LEGISLATORS ON THE FRONTLINES OF POLITICAL VIOLENCE

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