

Constituency Office Security: A Best Practices Guide for Parliamentarians

In this article, the author discusses the particular security challenges encountered when establishing and managing a constituency office. Drawing on the Legislative Assembly of Ontario's Investigative/Liaison Unit's best practices, he outlines steps constituency office staff can take proactively to secure their work places from potential disruptions.

Dennis Clark

Constituency offices are an integral part of our political infrastructure. They are friendly, open, customer-service environments that must balance security needs with the needs of the public to have access to their elected members. However, in today's world the nature of constituency offices encountering increasing security challenges must be addressed.

These challenges are not far removed from those that are present at our legislatures. Whether the threat comes from a deliberate attack, accident or naturally occurring event, the response will be significantly aided by previous undertakings to put security measures in place.

I had the pleasure of observing an excellent presentation on the security of constituency offices while attending the Canadian Sergeant-at-Arms Conference in British Columbia. Representatives from the Ontario and British Columbia legislatures focused on their respective programs, which were established to provide security assistance to constituency offices. The discussions that followed the presentations were also most informative.

These discussions fit well with many of the articles published in a recent issue of the Canadian Parliamentary Review (Volume 37, No. 2), which

explored interesting aspects of constituency life. This article focuses on another aspect of constituency life – the need for safety and security measures. Constituency offices are inherently inviting facilities that, in addition to everyday issues, must deal with persons with emotional and volatile concerns; there is also an increasing tendency for these offices to become a gathering point for demonstrators.

Ontario's System

Before becoming Ontario's Sergeant-at-Arms, I spent 30 years as a dedicated member of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. When you spend as much time as I have in law enforcement you are apt to accept this difficult truth: what people think will never happen to them does indeed happen to someone almost every day. This reality makes a proactive approach to security an intelligent choice.

While it is not specifically the mandate of the Sergeant-at-Arms office to establish a safety and security program for constituency offices, I believe this service is an undertaking that affords protection to both the constituency office and the legislature itself. One could make a strong argument that it is, at the very least, due diligence to extend the protection afforded to Members at their respective legislatures to their constituency offices. Moreover, constituency staff who dedicate their time to our communities deserve a safe environment in which to work. This is not only a moral obligation; it is also a legal obligation in many parts of our country.

Dennis Clark has served as the Legislative Assembly of Ontario's Sergeant-at-Arms for over 17 years following a 30-year career as an RCMP officer.



Constable Rohit Sharma of the Investigative Liaison Unit and Deborah Austin-Bunyak, an office administrator for the Legislative Security Service, discuss the constituency office safety and security program.

In Ontario, we have developed a program designed to educate Members and their staff about proper security protocols and how to handle difficult or even dangerous situations. The impetus for our program came about during a provincial labour dispute in the late 1990s, when our security service was inundated with calls from MPPs and constituency staff inquiring about strike activities and general safety. Since that time, we have fielded hundreds of calls from constituency staff regarding other safety and security concerns.

Attending to the security of constituency offices can seem like a daunting task when one takes into account the distance that must be covered in a large province like Ontario. Constituency offices here are spread across 1,076,395 square kilometers of territory. Devising a plan that allows our team to visit these offices within a reasonable timeframe does take planning and resources.

While on-site visits are the preferred option, there are multiple ways to share information in a timely manner. The creation of an electronic presentation or written materials can be a great addition to a new Member's welcome package following each election.

From Constituency Office to Legislature

Issues and concerns that arise at constituency offices often follow the Member to the legislature. Being aware of these issues in advance can substantially increase security providers' ability to prepare for possible outcomes. Therefore, constituency staff are a great source of information and can assist us to better prepare for possible disruptions by alerting us to incidents.

For example, incidents such as a 2013 episode in Ontario, where four members of a militant activist group were charged with forcible confinement after

attending a constituency office and refusing to allow the Member to leave, or an early 2014 incident in Vancouver where a man entered a constituency office and allegedly assaulted an assistant to the MLA while engaging in a homophobic rant, should always be reported to the security provider in place at the respective legislature.

On-site Visits

In Ontario, members of our Investigative/Liaison Unit visit constituency offices and prepare a safety and security report. We offer viable, cost-effective, and workable solutions, acting as a resource and making recommendations that Members are at liberty to implement.

Our constituency office visits also give us the opportunity to introduce our Legislative Security Service and to explain who we are, what we do and how we can assist. These meetings allow us to forge bonds with the constituency staff that prove mutually beneficial.

A component of our program is based on the Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) model. This approach to deterring criminal behaviour is multi-disciplinary. We believe that most constituency offices can be made safer through the application of design principles that make it more difficult to carry out inappropriate activities. The idea is to use the structural and environmental elements of a building such as windows, doors, parking, landscaping, and lighting to minimize the opportunity for crime.

Staff Training

Constituency staff provide services in an increasingly complex and dynamic social environment with diverse constituents. It is important that a safety plan exists for front-line workers which addresses exit strategies, de-escalation techniques and risk assessment.

Basic self-defence techniques, as well as a reporting system that can assist front-line workers to evaluate the potential for elevated risks of violence, are essential to promoting a safe working environment. We field calls on a regular basis from Members and constituency staff seeking advice on how to proceed with difficult clients. Currently we are looking to expand our program to offer an annual training day for constituency staff that may not be able to avail

themselves of the individualized program. Following each election we encourage newly elected Members to contact our security service for assistance in evaluating their security needs prior to choosing an office and entering into a lease agreement.

We also act as a liaison between the constituency office and the local police service. It never ceases to amaze me how many police services do not consider the security issues of a constituency office that is located within their district or division. It has been our experience that the police services appreciate the opportunity to become acquainted with the staff and are happy to supply resources to the constituency office when they have legitimate safety concerns.

Conclusion

The prevention of workplace violence and harassment should be a top priority for all employers. A safe workplace nurtures respect, creativity, allegiance, commitment and productivity. Should any readers wish additional information on establishing or enhancing a constituency security program, beyond our best practices checklist, I would be pleased to offer my services in support of your efforts.

Best Practices Checklist
Constituency offices should have:
<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Both front and rear entrances.○ A counter with a swing-entrance to assist with access control.○ A personal office closed in by interior walls with a separate entrance.○ A waiting area free from movable objects.○ A separate file room with locking cabinets.○ Protective coating on all glass to prevent shattering.○ Closed-circuit television (CCTV).○ An electronically controlled entrance to control access.