



NASS

National Association
of Secretaries of State

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ISSUE BRIEFING: Tabletop Exercises

The Issue: Tabletop exercises (TTX) are interactive sessions where a team discusses their roles and how they would respond during hypothetical incidents. A TTX can be used to exercise response to any type of potential incident, including cyber incidents, mis/disinformation incidents, physical security incidents, natural disasters, or a combination. Creating a successful TTX requires a great deal of prior planning.

You should create an incident response and/or continuity of operations plan before planning a TTX – see the [NASS issue briefing on cyber incident response planning](#).

What are the components of a TTX?

A TTX design should address:

- Focus: What type(s) of incidents?
- Target participants (e.g. just your IT staff, your full staff, federal partners, state partners, local government partners, vendors, etc.)
- Objectives: What do you want to accomplish? (e.g. assess understanding of roles and responsibilities, talk through implementation of full plan, identify gaps in plan, etc.)
- TTX staff:
 - o Facilitator – leads the TTX
 - o Moderators – help facilitator lead discussion, if needed
 - o Data collectors – record information during the TTX including successes and lessons
- Materials:
 - o Facilitator Guide – includes:
 - A copy of the incident response/continuity of operations plan being exercised
 - Focus, participants, and objectives
 - Scenario(s) – hypothetical incident(s) as well as injects that allow participants to consider whether/how to escalate response as incidents evolve
 - Discussion questions
 - o Participant Guide – includes same as above except, in some cases, injects and discussion questions

After the TTX, an after-action report should be created based on the data collected during the exercise along with feedback from participants. It should include lessons learned, along with action items for correction, and an evaluation of how well the exercise met its objectives.

Tabletop the Vote – Annual National TTX

Offices with election responsibility can participate remotely in “Tabletop the Vote,” an annual, national TTX which focuses on election-related cyber incidents and is hosted by the U.S.

Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) with support from the Election Infrastructure Subsector Government Coordinating Council (EIS-GCC). Offices with election responsibility can also request operational support from CISA in the creation and execution of an in-state TTX – contact NASS for more information.



Additional TTX resources and examples:

- [U.S. Department of Homeland Security Cyber Security and Infrastructure Security Agency's Elections Cyber Tabletop Exercise Package \(aka "Tabletop in a Box"\)](#)
- [Center for Internet Security's Cybersecurity TTX Scenarios](#)
- [Cyber Storm](#)
- [Federal Emergency Management Agency's Emergency Planning Exercises](#)
- [GridEx](#)
- [National Institute of Standard's and Technology's Guide to Test, Training, and Exercise Programs for IT Plans and Capabilities](#)

For additional questions on this issue, please contact NASS: (202) 624-3524 or lforson@sso.org.