

JOURNALISM PROTECTION INITIATIVE

Protecting the Truth

A Practical Safety Guide for Small Newsrooms

The Haitian Times • June 9, 2025

US Press Freedom Series

The Journalism Protection Initiative at the Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism is commissioning a series of briefing papers from top experts to address emerging threats to press freedom in the United States and fill gaps in knowledge and understanding.

Protecting the Truth

A Practical Safety Guide for Small Newsrooms

The Haitian Times • June 9, 2025

Contents

Introduction: Why Safety Must Be Proactive.....	2
Step 1: Acknowledge the Threat Landscape.....	3
Step 2: Assess Your Current Safety Readiness.....	4
Step 3: Create a Threat Documentation System.....	5
Step 4: Build Internal Safety Protocols.....	6
Step 5: Leverage Strategic Partnerships.....	7
Step 6: Integrate Mental Health Into Editorial Culture.....	8
Step 7: Address Legal, Compliance, and Insurance Gaps.....	9
Step 8: Create a Safety Roadmap.....	10
Tips for Immediate Action.....	11
Resources Required.....	11
Conclusion.....	13

Introduction: Why Safety Must Be Proactive

Small, immigrant-led, and mission-driven newsrooms face unique and escalating threats. From doxxing to legal intimidation and physical harassment, the risks are real and immediate. In September 2024, The Haitian Times experienced this first hand after publishing a report debunking xenophobic disinformation and attacks on Haitians in the U.S. The backlash escalated to a swatting incident that endangered a senior editor's life.

In our newsrooms, our commitment to the truth has often placed us at odds with systems of power, especially when covering sensitive topics like migration, systemic racism, and politics.

This guide, developed through our partnership with the Journalism Protection Initiative (JPI) and CUNY Graduate School of Journalism's Center for Community Media (CCM), outlines how small newsrooms can move from reacting to threats to building proactive, replicable safety systems. We hope our journey serves as a roadmap for others navigating similar challenges.

Step 1: Acknowledge the Threat Landscape

The modern threat environment includes such digital, physical, and operational risks as:

- Online disinformation campaigns
- Hate-fueled harassment and trolling
- Doxxing or the weaponized publication of personal private information
- Swatting attacks, namely, false emergency calls to elicit an armed police response
- Legal intimidation via lawsuits or regulatory scrutiny
- Hackers attempt to take site offline
- Physical danger and emotional anguish for correspondents, in the US and abroad

No newsroom is too small or too niche to be targeted. The key is preparation—not panic.

Step 2: Assess Your Current Safety Readiness

Begin with an internal safety evaluation (sometimes called a risk assessment). Use available tools such as the JPI Safety Matrix or risk assessment template from the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ).

Evaluate six core areas:

- Physical safety
- Digital security
- Legal preparedness
- Emergency response protocols
- Mental health and wellness
- Organizational culture

EXAMPLE FROM THE HAITIAN TIMES

Our initial evaluation revealed:

- No centralized emergency contact system
- No threat monitoring mechanism
- Unclear threat reporting channels
- High-risk conditions for Haiti-based correspondents without adequate support
- Vulnerabilities in safeguarding visible staff's physical and digital security
- No in-house counsel or digital security officer
- No budget to implement security protocols

This honest self-assessment laid the groundwork for change.

Step 3: Create a Threat Documentation System

Start tracking incidents systematically. This helps detect patterns and develop data-informed safety strategies.

How to build your system:

- Use a Google Form or similar tool for staff to report incidents
- Capture details like: Type of threat (verbal, digital, legal, physical), source (e.g., anonymous email, social media, spoofing), severity, response actions
- Maintain a centralized tracker
- Review reports quarterly to identify trends

WHY IT MATTERS

At The Haitian Times, documentation revealed that immigration and race reporting consistently triggered harassment – as does the gender of team members at times. This insight informed both editorial and safety planning as well as operational budgeting.

Step 4: Build Internal Safety Protocols

Transition from informal responses to standardized procedures.

What to include in a safety playbook:

- Team member's emergency contact name and information
- Contact list for real-time legal, digital, and emergency response support
- Personal profile self-evaluation template that may include: Immigrant status disclosures, identity-based risks
- Community / beat mapping template (if applicable)
- Steps to take in the event of a digital attack or swatting
- One checklist for the most likely attacks based on your assessment
- Template statements for public threats
- Incident escalation chart
- Safety debrief protocols after high-risk reporting
- Resources for different scenarios, including to mitigate individuals' risks based on personal profiles

Step 5: Leverage Strategic Partnerships

Small outlets rarely have full in-house legal or security teams. Partnerships and pro-bono counsel are therefore essential.

Who to connect with:

- International Women's Media Foundation (IWMF)
- Journalism Protection Initiative (JPI)
- Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ)
- Reporters Without Borders (RSF)
- Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press (RCFP)
- PEN America (PEN)
- International Center for Journalists (ICFJ)
- Lawyers for Reporters
- Center for Community Media (CCM)
- University law clinics or centers with First Amendment expertise
- Local law enforcement and DA
- Immigrant advocacy groups or networks
- Trauma-informed therapy networks (e.g., culturally-fluent counselors)
- Donors, subscribers and sources offering support

OUR EXPERIENCE

Through JPI, IWMF, and CPJ, we secured:

- Personal safety evaluation
- Emergency relocation and medical funds for reporters in Haiti
- Trauma counseling and safety
- Workflow guidance from safety specialists
- Participation in a national summit on journalist protection

Step 6: Integrate Mental Health Into Editorial Culture

The emotional toll of reporting on crises—especially when you're part of the affected community—can be severe. Treat mental health as core infrastructure, not a side issue.

Practical steps:

- Create space for staff to process trauma after difficult assignments
- Provide access to culturally appropriate mental health support, even if informal (e.g., mutual aid circles or peer check-ins)
- Integrate wellness into your regular newsroom schedule

WHAT WE LEARNED

Without support, staff burn out and become more vulnerable.

With support, they feel valued and safer.

Step 7: Address Legal, Compliance, and Insurance Gaps

Safety includes being prepared for numerous forms of harassment and cyber threats.

Key areas to cover:

- Libel/media liability insurance: Ensure it covers Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participant (SLAPP) suits and digital platforms for the organization and freelancers
- Cyber insurance: Should include both ransomware and denial-of-service attacks
- Emergency legal counsel: Have a designated contact for urgent situations, and make sure they know they are your contact

NOTE

Small outlets can access legal assistance through programs like Reporters Shield, RCFP, or Lawyers for Reporters.

Step 8: Create a Safety Roadmap

Formalize your long-term safety plan with timelines, goals, and deliverables. Include:

- Annual risk assessments, with as-needed updates
- Training cycles (digital hygiene, physical security, legal awareness)
- Protocol reviews and updates
- Collaboration plans with peer outlets for pooled resources
- Detailed incident response checklist tailored to small newsrooms

THE HAITIAN TIMES NEXT STEPS INCLUDE

- Finalizing and distributing our newsroom safety playbook
- Establishing training for editors and reporters on high-risk coverage
- Flagging upcoming sensitive stories or high profile breaking news for safety review
- Creating staff briefing templates
- Advocating for pooled safety funds in partnership with funders and allies
- Continuing to speak out against attacks and support infrastructure building initiatives

Tips for Immediate Action

CHECKLIST

- ☐ Run a newsroom safety audit
- ☐ Start addressing the most critical vulnerabilities
- ☐ Build a basic threat reporting system (Google Forms works!)
- ☐ Contact a legal support network
- ☐ Hold a safety-focused editorial meeting
- ☐ Identify one external partner to build a relationship with
- ☐ Talk openly about trauma and mental health

Resources Required

Implementing a proactive safety strategy doesn't require a massive budget—but it does require intention, partnerships, and prioritization.

Here are the core resources needed to operationalize the recommendations in this guide:

TIME AND INTERNAL LEADERSHIP

- One staff person (editor or manager) designated to lead safety coordination
- 2–4 hours/month for safety planning, review, and staff check-ins
- Quarterly threat assessment or reflection meetings

FREE OR LOW-COST TOOLS

- Google Workspace (Google Forms, Sheets): For threat tracking and incident reporting
- Signal or WhatsApp: For secure internal communications
- 1Password or Bitwarden: For managing strong, shared passwords
- DeleteMe or Incogni (low-cost): For monitoring and removing personal info online

EXTERNAL SUPPORT

- Pro bono legal help from:
- Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press (RCFP)
- Lawyers for Reporters
- Cornell Law First Amendment Clinic
- Dratel Lewis LLP
- Safety training and/or toolkits from:
- Journalism Protection Initiative (JPI)
- Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ)
- International Women's Media Foundation (IWMF)
- PEN America

EMERGENCY FUNDS (SUGGESTED MINIMUM: \$3,000–\$5,000)

Used for:

- Short-term relocation
- Mental health services
- Replacement of compromised devices
- Mobile/data stipends for secure communication

Conclusion

Safety is not a luxury—it's a prerequisite for continuing the work of journalism, especially in vulnerable communities. The Haitian Times has learned that waiting until a crisis hits is too late. With modest tools, honest evaluation, and the right support, small newsrooms can be resilient and prepared.

Our hope is that this guide becomes a starting point for any outlet navigating the reality of threats. With structure, solidarity, and intention, we can all do this better—and together.