

Dealing with threats

A RESOURCE GUIDE FOR ACTIVISTS

Learn how to respond to threatening phone calls and letters safely. Keep this guide handy for anyone in your organisation who opens mail or takes phone calls.

A COMMON form of harassment is threatening phone calls, often after 'trigger events' such as media stories or government decisions. Usually these are directed at whoever answers the phone, occasionally to a specific person and sometimes left on an answering machine.

Threatening phone calls

- Keep calm. No matter how menacing the call do not get into an argument. Use the form over the page and record as much information as you can.
- Remember that it is rare for anything to come after threatening phone calls. People make such calls thinking they can scare you but having no intention of actually doing anything.
- Once the call is over, ensure that you discuss it with someone in the organisation.
- If the message is on an answering machine, do not delete it. Transcribe it and either keep the tape or do a copy.
- If you have a regular police liaison person, contact them as soon as possible. *Never* give police your only copy of notes or a tape.
- If you get a number of calls from the same person make sure you mention this to the police. It usually takes a number of calls before police will even consider getting a trace on your line.
- You might push a number on your handset

mid-call which will give a tone on the line and imply to the caller that you are activating a trace. This deters many callers.

- It can be useful to have a handheld dictaphone with a microphone socket. An induction microphone can be obtained for about \$8 to attach to the back of the earpiece and record the conversation. It is illegal to record phone conversations without the consent of the other party. Informing threatening callers that you are about to tape the conversation may mean that they will hang up and not ring back.
- If most calls go to a reception desk make sure the individual(s) at reception have copies of the accompanying form.
- Talk to the people at the reception desk about how to handle such calls and to whom they need to report any threatening calls.
- Inform all new staff of the procedures of handling such calls.
- If incoming phone calls are dealt with by many people make sure that everyone has copies of the accompanying form and knows what to do.
- After a person has handled a threatening call, make sure someone sits down with them and talks through what happened and what information was recorded.

Handling threatening letters

More common than threatening phone calls are threatening letters.

If mail to your organisation is opened by one person, make sure that they have a copy of these notes and talk to them about the procedure for handling threatening mail.

If mail procedures are fluid, make sure that everyone in the organisation knows the basic procedure for dealing with mailed threats.

If you receive a threatening letter:

- As soon as you realise it contains a threat avoid handling the surface of the paper.
- Pick the letter up by the edges and place it and the envelope into a plastic sleeve.

THREATENING PHONE CALL CHECKLIST – DON'T HANG UP!

Date ___/___/___

Time call started

Time call ended

Received by

On phone number

If you have caller ID write down the incoming call number

If insufficient space, record other details and attach to this form

EXACT WORDS USED

.....

.....

.....

.....

FOR BOMB THREAT, ASK

Where is it?

When will it go off?

What type is it?

What does it look like?

.....

Who are you?

FOR PERSONAL THREAT, ASK

Who is being threatened?

.....

Where is the threat?

.....

When will threatened action occur?

.....

Where will threatened action occur?

.....

Who are you?

Why are you doing this?

.....

INFORMATION ON THE CALLER

Male/Female/Child

Estimated age

Conditions affecting speech (eg intoxicated/angry/excited/calm/loud)

.....

.....

Particulars of speech (eg accent/mispronunciation)

.....

.....

Background noise (music, traffic, talking)

.....

.....

Type of call – were there STD tones at the start of the call? Did it sound like it was from a mobile eg dropping out or driving in car?

.....

.....

- Photocopy both the envelope and the letter and keep the copy for your files.
- Place your copy into a file for such letters – over time you may notice a pattern from handwriting, postmarks or details.
- Make a note of who handled the letter and envelope before you realised it was a threatening letter – if police want to test for fingerprints this will help in isolating those of the author.
- Make sure people who have responsibility for police liaison or dealing with such events are promptly notified.

Defend the Defenders

May 2002

Published by:
Environment Defenders Office (EDO) Victoria
1/504 Victoria St North Melbourne VIC 3051

Ph: (03) 9328 4811 Fax: (03) 9326 5687

Other guides in this series are available at www.edo.org.au.