

Fact Sheet: Unlawful Militias in Washington

What is a militia?

Federal and state laws generally use the term “militia” to refer to all able-bodied residents between certain ages who may be called forth by the government to defend the United States or an individual state. *See* 10 U.S.C. § 246. When not called forth, they are sometimes referred to as the “unorganized militia.” A group of people who consider themselves part of the able-bodied residents referred to as members of the militia under state or federal law is not legally permitted to activate itself for duty. A private militia that attempts to activate itself for duty, outside of the authority of the state or federal government, is illegal.

How do I know if a group of armed people is an unauthorized private militia?

Groups of armed individuals that engage in paramilitary activity or law enforcement functions without being called forth by a governor or the federal government and without reporting to any government authority are acting as unauthorized private militias. They sometimes train together and respond to events using firearms and other paramilitary techniques, such as staking out tactical positions and operating in military-style formations. They often purport to have authority to engage in military and law enforcement functions such as protecting property and engaging in crowd control.

These groups often engage in behaviors that show their intent to act as a private militia, such as wearing military-style uniforms, tactical gear, or identifying insignia; wielding firearms or other weapons; and operating within a coordinated command structure. Other factors—such as statements by leaders or members’ efforts to direct the actions of others—also may suggest that a group is acting as a private militia. Groups of armed individuals may engage in unauthorized militia activity even if they do not consider themselves to be “members” of a paramilitary organization.

Does the Second Amendment protect private militias?

No. In fact, the Supreme Court decided in 1886—and repeated in 2008—that the Second Amendment “does not prevent the prohibition of private paramilitary organizations.” *District of Columbia v. Heller*, 554 U.S. 570, 621 (2008) (citing *Presser v. Illinois*, 116 U.S. 252 (1886)).

Is it legal to act as a private militia in Washington?

No. All 50 states prohibit private, unauthorized militias and military units from engaging in activities reserved for the state militia, including law enforcement activities. Some, including Washington, also prohibit paramilitary activity during or in furtherance of a civil disorder. Washington’s laws are described below:

Washington Constitution: The Washington Constitution forbids private military units from operating outside state authority, providing that “[t]he military shall be in strict subordination to the civil power.” Wash. Const. art. I, § 18. It also makes clear that the “right of the individual citizen to bear arms in defense of himself, or the state,” does not authorize “individuals or corporations to organize, maintain or employ an armed body of men.” *Id.* § 24.

Washington Statutes

Prohibition on private military units: Washington law makes it illegal for groups of people to organize as private militias without permission from the state. It is a misdemeanor for any “organized body other than the recognized militia

organizations of this state, armed forces of the United States,” military schools, and veterans organizations to “associate themselves together as a military company or organize or parade in public with firearms.” Wash. Rev. Code § 38.40.120.

Prohibition on paramilitary activity: It is a felony in Washington to teach or demonstrate how to use, apply, or make “any device or technique capable of causing significant bodily injury or death to persons, knowing, or having reason to know or intending that same will be unlawfully employed for use in, or in furtherance of, a civil disorder.” Wash. Rev. Code § 9A.48.120.

Prohibition on impersonation of law enforcement: It is also a crime in Washington for a person to “create[] an impression that he or she is a law enforcement officer” and do “an act with intent to convey the impression that he or she is acting in an official capacity” such that “a reasonable person would believe the person is a law enforcement officer.” Wash. Rev. Code § 9A.60.045.

What should I do if I see armed groups near a polling place or voter registration drive?

First, document what you see:

- What are the armed people doing?
- What are the armed people wearing?
- Are they carrying firearms? If so, what type? If not, are they carrying other types of weapons?
- Are they wearing insignia? If so, what does it say or look like?
- Are they bearing signs or flags?
- Do they seem to be patrolling like a law enforcement officer might do?
- Do they seem to be coordinating their actions?
- Do they have a leader?
- Are they stopping or talking to people outside of their group?
- Do they appear to be provoking or threatening violence? If so, what are they doing specifically?
- Are people turning away from the polling station after seeing or speaking with them?

Second, call Election Protection at 866-OUR-VOTE (866-687-8683) to report what you see.

Assistance is also available in **Spanish** at 888-VE-Y-VOTA (888-839-8682), in **Arabic** at 844-YALLA-US (844-915-5187), and **Asian languages** at 888-API-VOTE (1-888-274-8683). A video call number for **American Sign Language** is available at 301-818-VOTE (301-818-8683).

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