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Victorian Councillors Face Abuse, Say Police Ignore Harassment

July 30, 2025

– Categories: Human Rights



Victorian councillors report relentless abuse from residents, but claim police dismiss it as political dialogue unless it involves death threats.

Councillors across Victoria are grappling with a surge of harassment from ratepayers and residents, describing it as “relentless” and often ignored by law enforcement. A 2024 survey by the Local Government Association (LGA) revealed that 73% of councillors experienced abuse or intimidation in the past year, with 22% reporting threats of violence and 5% receiving death threats. Despite these figures, councillors say Victoria Police rarely act unless threats explicitly involve loss of life, often classifying lesser harassment as “political dialogue.”

Moonee Valley City Council (MVCC) councillor Ava Adams told *The Age* that verbal attacks, including aggressive confrontations at public events, are dismissed by police as part of the job. “The abuse is constant, but unless it’s a direct death threat, authorities won’t step in,” she said. The LGA’s Debate Not Hate campaign highlights that 23% of councillors reported abuse serious enough to warrant police involvement, yet responses remain inconsistent. Marianne Overton, chair of the LGA’s civility steering group, emphasized that such inaction risks normalizing hostility, stating, “Councillors should feel safe serving their communities.”

The Crimes Act 1958 outlines that threatening violence is an indictable offense, yet councillors report a high threshold for police action. Victorian Police Association (VPA) secretary Wayne Gatt noted that resource constraints limit responses to non-urgent cases, with only 21,326 staff, including 15,842 officers, handling 514,398 recorded offenses in 2023–2024. Shadow Police Minister Brad Battin criticized the state’s approach, arguing that underfunding and soft policies have left police overstretched, undermining councillor safety.

The Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission (IBAC) reported in October 2024 that public sector misconduct complaints, including against councillors, are rising, complicating efforts to address harassment. One in ten councillors reported intimidating visits to their homes, prompting 43% to withhold their addresses from public records. As local governments push for stronger protections, the lack of decisive action leaves councillors vulnerable, raising concerns about the toll on democracy and public service.