SLED

Cybersecurity Fundamentals for State, Local & Education Organizations

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State, local, and education organizations run critical services on lean teams and tight budgets, which is exactly why they're targeted. The good news: most meaningful risk reduction doesn't start with buying tools. It starts with a shared framework, a clear-eyed look at your foundational controls, and an honest sequence of what to fix first. This guide lays out the fundamentals public-sector IT leaders can use to build a defensible, fundable plan.

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Why SLED organizations are targeted

There is nothing mysterious about why ransomware operators like the public sector. Counties, municipalities, school systems, and state agencies combine three traits attackers value: sensitive data (resident records, student data, court and health records), services that cannot tolerate downtime (dispatch, payroll, utilities, schools in session), and security programs that are usually understaffed relative to what they protect.

Pressure to restore services quickly is exactly what extortion is designed to exploit. None of this means public-sector teams are careless. It means the economics favor the attacker unless the fundamentals are deliberately in place. The encouraging part: the fundamentals are well understood, mostly inexpensive, and they work.

Start with frameworks, not products

The fastest way to waste a constrained budget is to buy tools before you have a map. Two free, widely adopted frameworks give public-sector teams that map: the **CIS Critical Security Controls**, a prioritized list of safeguards ordered by what stops real attacks, and the **NIST Cybersecurity Framework**, a higher-level structure (govern, identify, protect, detect, respond, recover) that is useful for talking to leadership and auditors.

You do not need to "implement a framework" wholesale to get value. The working pattern is map, then prioritize: take your current controls, place them against the framework, and let the gaps, not vendor outreach, set the order of work. A one-page mapping against the CIS Controls is also one of the most effective artifacts you can hand a council, board, or grant reviewer, because it shows a plan rather than a wish list.

A side benefit for education organizations: framework alignment is increasingly written into law and policy. Utah's **HB 44 school cybersecurity requirements**, for example, direct the state to align LEA standards with NIST and CIS frameworks. Work you anchor to those frameworks now tends to count later.

Foundational controls that move the needle first

If you are sequencing from scratch, four controls reliably deliver the most risk reduction per dollar and per staff-hour:

THE FOUNDATIONAL FOUR

Control	What it counters	First moves
MFA everywhere it matters	Stolen and reused credentials, still the most common way in	Email, VPN and remote access, admin accounts, and finance systems first
Backups you have actually tested	Ransomware leverage and permanent data loss	Keep one copy offline or immutable, and restore from it on a schedule. The test is the control
Email security beyond the default filter	Phishing and payment fraud, where most incidents begin	Modern filtering, sender authentication (SPF, DKIM, DMARC), and an easy way for staff to report suspicious messages
Security awareness for the human layer	Social engineering aimed at the people who approve payments and click links	Short, continuous, measured training with phishing simulation and follow-up for those who struggle

A useful test for any proposed purchase: does it strengthen one of these four, or does it assume they are already solid? If the foundations are shaky, the new tool is usually furniture on sand.

Funding and procurement realities

Public-sector security work is constrained less by intent than by budget cycles and procurement rules, and it helps to plan around both. Grant programs exist at the federal and state level specifically for state and local cybersecurity. Availability and terms change year to year, so verify the current status of any program before you build a budget on it. Framework-mapped gap lists (see above) are precisely what grant applications want to fund.

On the buying side, cooperative purchasing and public-sector procurement vehicles let agencies and districts buy against contracts that are already competitively bid, which can shorten months of cycle time. Which vehicle fits depends on your entity type and state. This is a place where an hour with someone who works across these paths regularly can save real money and real time.

Building a roadmap with limited staff

Most SLED security programs are run by people who also have a day job: an IT director wearing four hats, a two-person team covering a county. The honest answer to that constraint is sequencing, not heroics:

THE SEQUENCE

1. **Inventory what you have**

   Systems, data, vendors with access, and controls already in place. You cannot defend what you have not listed.

2. **Map against a framework and mark the gaps**

   An afternoon with the CIS Controls is enough for a first pass.

3. **Fix the foundational four**

   MFA, tested backups, email security, awareness training. Before anything exotic.

4. **Write down the incident plan and rehearse it once**

   Who you call and your reporting obligations. A one-page plan beats a binder nobody opens.

5. **Revisit quarterly**

   A roadmap reviewed four times a year survives staff turnover and budget season; a one-time project does not.

An outside advisor is most valuable at steps two and three: pressure-testing the gap list against what actually causes incidents, and keeping vendor enthusiasm from reordering your priorities. The roadmap itself should stay yours.

Where Harborcoat fits

Harborcoat is a team of strategic security and IT advisors with a public-sector focus. We help SLED organizations build the map described above (current controls, framework gaps, a sequenced plan), and we help navigate funding and procurement paths when budget enters the picture. Where implementation is needed, we coordinate vetted partner firms rather than deploying in-house, so our recommendations stay independent.

If you are early in this process, the most useful next step is usually a working session on your priorities: what to fix first, what the realistic options are, and what they cost. That conversation is free, and you keep the map either way.

Sources & further reading

CIS Critical Security Controls (https://www.cisecurity.org/controls) · Center for Internet Security; prioritized safeguards, free to use.

NIST Cybersecurity Framework (https://www.nist.gov/cyberframework) · National Institute of Standards and Technology.

CISA resources for state, local, tribal, and territorial governments (https://www.cisa.gov/audiences/state-local-tribal-and-territorial-government) · Federal services and current grant program information; verify program status before budgeting.

> **Map your priorities with an advisor**
> Bring your current state, even if it is a spreadsheet and a hunch. A Harborcoat advisor can help you turn it into a sequenced, fundable plan.
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