House of Worship Violence

Violent incidents happen at religious organizations across the country on an increasingly regular basis. According to the Violence Prevention Project, there were 399 deadly force incidents at houses of worship in the United States between 2020 and 2025.

Because places of worship are open to the public, religious organizations have become more vulnerable to these senseless acts of violence. This fact sheet addresses what religious organizations can do to prepare for, and respond to, violent acts.

The Reality of Violence at Religious Organizations

- Houses of worship are not immune from acts of violence, which may include robbery, assault, rape, even attempted murder or murder.
- The majority of violent acts are carried out by people who have some connection to the congregation, whether through a domestic situation or other relationship to a member or staff person. More rarely, they are perpetrated because of the organization's stand on issues or its demographic composition. Even more rarely, violence may be perpetrated by a mentally ill individual with no known connection to the organization.
- The most common violent act is a shooting.
- Often there are precursors or warning signs to the violent act, such as threats or previous outbursts, disputes, or confrontations.
- Many organizations are unprepared for a violent event or its aftermath.

Who is at Risk?

- Religious organizations of all sizes, locations, and resources have experienced acts of violence. No organization is immune to the risk of a violent episode occurring.

How to Make Your Organization Less Vulnerable

- Working with your organization's Safety and Security Team, designate a point person on security issues to be the security director. Define the responsibilities of that position.

- Conduct a security assessment to identify your facility's vulnerabilities. Ideally, this assessment is conducted in conjunction with your local law enforcement agency or other security professionals.

- Develop a security plan and guidelines with defined roles for all staff persons, including greeters, ushers, and other front-line workers and volunteers. Your local law enforcement agency may be a resource to you in forming the security plan.

    - Include in the plan a location for ushers and/or security personnel, lock down procedures for areas of the facility, crisis communications, and an evacuation plan for the building.

- Establish a method for quickly communicating issues of concern, to appropriate organization personnel, as well as to authorities. Depending on the size of your organization, walkie-talkies, two-way radios, and/or cell phones may be appropriate to have on hand.

- Work with your local law enforcement agency to provide training for staff and front-line workers and volunteers on topics such as dealing with disruptive individuals and identifying and diffusing potentially violent situations.

A Word about Security Guards

The use of professional or volunteer security guards at houses of worship has become more commonplace in recent years. An organization has several options regarding security guards: 1) hire off-duty law enforcement personnel; 2) hire a professional security guard service; or 3) maintain its own security guard force. Considerations for each option:

Off-Duty Law Enforcement

- Active law enforcement officers typically have superior training and experience in dealing with suspicious individuals.

- In many jurisdictions, off-duty law enforcement officers responding to a criminal act do so as police officers, which can provide houses of worship some measure of liability protection.

- Religious organizations should come to a meeting of the minds with the law enforcement officer(s) about the preferred approach to security at the organization.

- Understand that off-duty law enforcement officers and/or their agencies are not likely to provide indemnity (hold harmless) agreements and additional insurance protection to the organization, such as may be obtained from a professional security guard service.

Hired Security Guard Force

- The use of a professional security guard service provides a layer of liability protection for the organization.
- The organization still must undertake reasonable precautions in hiring the security service, such as checking references and fully understanding the service's screening, training, supervision procedures as well as the approach to use of force that should be consistent with the organization's position.
- The organization should verify that the security guard company has a license by obtaining a copy of it.
- The organization should enter into a written agreement with the security guard service in which the service agrees to indemnify (hold harmless) the organization from any injury or damage that might result from the service's activities.

- The organization should make sure that security guard service is fully insured and have the organization added as an additional insured on the service's insurance policies. Then, the organization should obtain a copy of a certificate of insurance showing that it has been added as an additional insured on the service's insurance policies.

Own Security Guard Force:

- The organization is responsible for running background checks and screening all security guard personnel.
- The organization is responsible for the training and supervision of its security guard personnel.
- Since "security" is a regulated profession in many jurisdictions, the organization is responsible for ensuring that its security force complies with all licensing and certification requirements that might exist under its state's law.
- The organization will in most circumstances be liable for the acts of its security guards.

The use of armed security guards presents additional considerations. While the presence of armed guards can potentially prevent or bring an end to an episode of violence, their use also raises the risk of injury or death to innocent bystanders, claims for the use of excessive force, and an increased burden for ensuring that all guards are properly screened, trained, and supervised. Also, armed security guards must be properly licensed; hold necessary permits; and only carry legal and authorized weapons.

Arming your organization's security guards is something that should only be undertaken in consultation with your organization's legal counsel, local law enforcement, and your insurance agent.

What to Do in the Event of a Violent Incident

If a violent incident occurs, the first priority is to protect the people in your congregation. To do this, follow these steps:

- Call 911.
- If there is an opportunity to keep the invader out by locking doors and/or closing off areas of the facility, do so.
- If there is an opportunity to remove all members and guests from the premises, do so as quickly as possible.
- Quickly control panic situations. By doing so, you will be more likely to conduct a sequenced evacuation, if possible.
- A leader, such as the pastor and/or security director, should take charge and provide orders to be followed.
- All orders should be clear and direct, such as the following:
    - "Ushers, secure the building."
    - "(Fill in name), contact the police."
    - "(Fill in name), secure the nursery."
    - "Everyone, take cover on the floor."

How to Make Your House of Worship Staff and Members Less Vulnerable

- Never allow staff to work alone. Always ensure that there are at least two employees present at all times.
- Establish an internal distress code that will alert others in the office to your need for assistance. For example, if workers typically address each other by first name, your distress code may be that addressing a colleague by last name (i.e., “Mr. Smith”) will signal a distress situation.
- Keep all doors locked except when in use and then limit access points as much as possible.
- Consider installation of a “panic button” for front line workers such as receptionists.
- Ensure that exterior lighting is adequate in all areas, especially parking lots and walkways. Ask your local law enforcement for assistance with a lighting audit.
- Always park your car in a well-lit area that is not obstructed by shrubbery, dumpsters, or vehicles.
- Ensure that all staff know of and understand the organization’s security plan.
- Prepare for the worst-case scenario.

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