

HOW HOUSES OF WORSHIP CAN BEST PREPARE FOR THE WORST

Since my initial post on this subject in 2018, the world has once more undergone significant shifts, both on the global stage and within our own borders. As a result, I have taken a few moments to revisit my thoughts on this topic.

With the ongoing conflicts in the Middle East and the seemingly persistent gun violence in our own country, heightened concerns around the security of diverse faith communities have prompted us all to reevaluate and increase safety within places of worship and affiliated educational institutions. Regardless of your faith, those who gather, and worship have a right to feel safe to do so in the United States. Nonetheless, sanctuaries of faith grapple with the delicate balance between maintaining an atmosphere of openness and inclusivity while ensuring the safety of their congregants. Let's explore a few fundamental principles and strategies to ensure members and visitors feel safe.

1. Know Your Risks and Have Relationships

Some faith communities are under specific risk of violence given the geopolitical environment and specific global conflicts. While many faith communities have a good understanding of general risks to their communities, they need to also be knowledgeable about specific risks. There are times when a faith community may become a potential target of violence based on race, ethnicity, and/or political positions. In these instances, having active engagement with law enforcement is a must. While both local and federal authorities are familiar with larger geo-political issues and the potential for risks of violence, faith communities should proactively pursue these law enforcement relationships to ensure an ongoing dialogue. Information and relationships are important in helping any faith community prepare and mitigate risks as best they can.

2. Have a Plan and a Team, if appropriate

At this point, having a basic documented [security plan](#) should be a priority for every faith community, regardless of size. Your security plan can provide information such as notification phone numbers for staff and fire/police, an identified spot for the community to meet in the event of an emergency or natural disaster, and even a security checklist for events. While you may not need to provide a copy of the plan to every member, knowing that community leadership has taken the time to think through security can provide them with a sense of reassurance that the issue is

being taken seriously.

If you have the luxury, identify specific individuals responsible for security. This is sometimes too demanding for smaller communities, but even having one or two people who can provide directions, answer questions, and interact with law enforcement can be helpful.

Security plans will differ depending on risk and your response will depend on the risk presented. Regardless, here are some initial things to think through that will be helpful when developing a plan.

- How do you secure your most vulnerable areas, such as childcare areas and meeting spaces?
- Where are the most logical and optional exits for your space/s?
- Where do you go in the event you need to evacuate your space?
- What do you do if you do not know it is safe to evacuate? Do you have the ability to shelter in place safely?
- In a natural disaster, where is the closest fire alarm and extinguisher?
- In the event of an active shooter, how should you respond? What are your options?
- How do you notify someone in your congregation and/or law enforcement if you see a crime or a person you are concerned about?
- Do you have access to a communication tool which can keep your community updated about any emergency?

Law enforcement agencies may have readily available draft security plans that can be a good start. For more high risk and larger communities consulting with outside security experts may be appropriate.

3. Communication is Key – People Are Already Thinking About Security Whether You Are Talking About It or Not

The importance of communication is even more essential today. While it used to be hard for faith communities to talk about security, now members are demanding a discussion. With the continuation of gun violence and its impact on faith-based schools and services, it is no longer a topic which can be dismissed. No communication plan is perfect, but being able to articulate your plan and a thoughtful message around security from leadership to the entire faith community is both responsible and reassuring. Your members and visitors are dependent on good planning if something bad happens. Working with faith leadership, law enforcement partners, security experts and engaged lay leaders, your community can best decide how to discuss this topic and plan accordingly.

4. Security Training and Tools

Once considered a difficult subject to broach in certain circles, it is now imperative not only to engage in open discussions but also to undergo essential training. Even within educational institutions, children engage in conversations and receive training to prepare for the possibility of active shooter situations.

There are a variety of training resources in this area, potentially within your own community. In many places, local law enforcement makes themselves available to train communities and enhance their ability to respond to a crisis. Another way to prepare includes providing access to your facility to law enforcement. This access can provide them with valuable information about your site in the event they need to respond to an event. Third party security consulting firms

are also available if larger scale and/or more personalized training is needed,

A variety of security tools are also available to increase the physical security of your space including those that limit access to specific areas. In addition, church specific applications as well as wider commercial communication tools can be used to keep your staff and community informed in the event of a threat.

In light of the evolving need to strike a delicate balance between openness and security within faith-based facilities and educational institutions, it becomes increasingly evident that expert guidance is essential. In these challenging times, seeking the expertise of a third-party consultant, well-versed in crafting tailored security solutions for such environments, can prove invaluable. By collaborating with experienced professionals, institutions can not only navigate the intricacies of implementing these principles but also enhance the safety and well-being of their members and students. We encourage you to consider such partnerships to create comprehensive and effective security plans for the benefit of all.

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STEPHANIE DOUGLAS

President, National Security Practice

Stephanie Douglas focuses on sensitive internal and white-collar crime investigations, corporate security programs, intellectual property (IP) protection and investigations, and proactively educating executives about insider threats. She has extensive experience in the management of criminal and national security investigations, domestic and global security operations and policy development and strategy. Ms. Douglas has had a distinguished career in both the private and public sectors. After 23 years, she retired as a Senior Executive from the Federal Bureau of Investigations where she served in a variety of influential roles. She also served as the senior director of corporate security for Pacific Gas & Electric prior to joining Guidepost Solutions.