

Active Shooter in a House of Worship

While houses of worship traditionally are places of safety and peace, they are not immune to gun violence. While shootings in houses of worship are rare, they can result in many fatalities and traumatize a community. As a religious leader, you should help your congregation be prepared for this type of crisis—and, if necessary, lead your community through a healthy recovery process.

TIP SHEET

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Shootings at houses of worship and religious schools have led religious leaders to question what they can do to protect their congregations. This emerging need poses a challenge to religious leaders who want to provide safety without sacrificing the welcoming atmosphere of their houses of worship. These incidents may occur at any time, during virtually any size gathering or age range of people on the premises; they may be hate crimes, terrorist acts, acts of retribution, or simply random violence. Nevertheless, religious leaders can take steps to reduce the likelihood and the impact of an active shooter in a house of worship, religious school or other religious events, sites or facilities.

MITIGATION/PREVENTION

Mitigating active shooter events is a very complex and difficult procedure—it isn't always possible. This type of crisis can occur at any time, for example, during worship, congregational events or regular business hours. The best course of action to protect and prepare your congregation is to develop and practice an Emergency Action Plan (EAP); see the 'Preparedness' section below for more information. Additionally, houses of worship can and should take certain steps to decrease the likelihood of experiencing an active shooter situation. As a religious leader, you may be at the hub of community outreach and have a clear understanding of your surrounding area, as well as your religious community. Work to foster a welcoming environment and respectful attitude both within your house of worship and in the surrounding community. One way to minimize the risk of violent incidents is to keep yourself up to date with happenings in your community and with developments among its various populations in order to understand your house of worship's vulnerabilities. In addition, open and mutually supportive relationships with local police and other emergency services should be established and maintained. Work with local police to identify and monitor hate crime trends or groups who may pose a threat to you, your congregation or community.

PREPAREDNESS

To best prepare yourself and your staff for an active shooter situation, create an **Emergency Action Plan (EAP)**, and conduct **Training Exercises**. Together, the EAP and training exercises will prepare your staff to effectively respond and help minimize loss of life.

Components of an Emergency Action Plan (EAP):

Create the EAP with input from several stakeholders including your human resources department, your training department (if one exists), facility owners/operators, your property manager, and local law enforcement and/or emergency responders. Your plan must be specific to your house of worship, reflecting its particular facilities and staff. An effective EAP includes:

- A preferred method for reporting emergencies
- An evacuation policy and procedure
- Emergency escape procedures and route assignments (i.e., floor plans, safe areas)
- Contact information for, and responsibilities of, individuals to be contacted under the EAP
- Information concerning local area hospitals (i.e., name, telephone number, and distance from your location)
- An emergency notification system to alert various parties of an emergency including: individuals at remote locations within premises; local law enforcement; local hospitals.

Components of Training Exercises

The most effective way to train your staff to respond to an active shooter situation is to conduct mock active shooter training exercises. Local law enforcement is an excellent resource in designing training exercises. Staff should be trained in:

- Recognizing the sound of gunshots
- Reacting quickly when gunshots are heard and/or when a shooting is witnessed:
 - Evacuating the area
 - Hiding out
 - Acting against the shooter as a last resort
 - Calling 911
 - Reacting when law enforcement arrives
 - Adopting the survival mind set during times of crisis

Additional Ways to Prepare For Active Shooter Situation

- Ensure that your facility has at least two evacuation routes
- Post evacuation routes in conspicuous locations throughout your facility
- Include local law enforcement and first responders during training exercises
- Encourage law enforcement, emergency responders, SWAT teams, K-9 teams, and bomb squads to train for an active shooter scenario at your facilities or events.

PROPER CONDUCT DURING ACTIVE SHOOTER CRISIS

When an active shooter is inside of your house of worship, you and your staff should lead your congregation in taking the following steps to minimize the loss of life.

When in the vicinity of an active shooter:

Evacuate

- Have an escape route and plan in mind
- Leave your belongings behind
- Keep your hands visible

Hide Out

- Hide in an area out of the shooter's view
- Block entry to your hiding place and lock the doors
- Silence your cell phone and/or pager

Take Action

- As a last resort and only when your life is in imminent danger, take action against the shooter
- Attempt to incapacitate the shooter
- Act with physical aggression and throw items at the active shooter

When law enforcement arrives:

- Identify the location of the shooter, if known
- Remain calm and follow instructions
- Put down any items in your hands (i.e., bags, jackets)
- Raise hands and spread fingers
- Keep hands visible at all times
- Avoid quick movements toward officers such as holding on to them for safety
- Avoid pointing, screaming or yelling
- Do not stop to ask officers for help or direction when evacuating

Note: While this checklist is meant to give the basics of proper procedure during an active shooter crisis, it by no means should be used as a substitute for developing an EAP and putting it into practice through training sessions.

CONGREGATIONAL RECOVERY

Was This a Hate Crime?

An immediate reaction to this type of situation might be to claim that it was a hate crime against your specific religious group. However, law enforcement officials will want to see evidence of such a bias motivation. Arguing heatedly with law enforcement over the motivation behind the shooting will neither help the congregation heal nor contribute to law enforcement's ability to properly investigate the crime. While the alternative may be challenging, it is best to look objectively at the information and work with law enforcement to investigate the motivation behind the incident. If you do believe that you or your congregation were a victim of a hate crime, please see the hate crime checklist in the 'Other Resources' section.

Disaster Backlash

It is possible that, after an active shooter situation, members of your congregation will attempt some type of backlash against other people associated with the shooter. This is especially true if the shooter was of a different race, religion, or socio-economic class from that of members of your congregation. This backlash may manifest itself in discrimination or crimes and can be directed at a certain race, religion, or even the gunman's family. As a religious leader, you must promote tolerance, peace, unity, and understanding if the community is to recover in a healthy manner. For more information on disaster backlash and proper mitigation techniques see **NDIN Tip Sheet "Disaster Backlash: Bias Crimes & Motivation."**

Lessons Learned

While it may be challenging to address the impact of an active shooter incident objectively and strategically, given the emotional toll of such a crisis, this step is necessary to facilitate effective planning for future emergencies. It is important to analyze the recent active shooter situation and create an after-action report, which will be useful for:

- Serving as documentation for response or recovery activities
- Identifying successes and failures that occurred during the event
- Work with law enforcement to provide an analysis of the effectiveness of your existing EAP
- Describing and defining a plan for making improvements to the EAP
- Edit your plan and security infrastructure and training based on this information and practice that plan!