



# The Diocese of Syracuse

Risk Management Department . . . CARES™



## Church Security *Usher/Staff Training*

Having a highly visible safety/security team may actually prevent or reduce the potential for a threat and offer comfort to your parishioners. Since Ushers and Greeters are often able to be the first ones to closely observe visitors coming onto your property, they should all be part of your safety/security team and should have regular and documented training exercises. It is important to keep focused on both safety and security at your entire place of worship. Try to think basic before you think of high tech or high costs. Your training does not have to be complex, creating a “combat” ready environment; rather, it should consist of providing materials on safety and security issues, high risk or threat situations and general emergency situations.

### Trained vs. Untrained

- During an act of violence, the trained individual may experience anxiety, but the untrained will likely panic.
- The trained individual will recall their training, whereas the untrained will be in disbelief or shock.
- The trained individual will be prepared to act, whereas the untrained will become lost in denial.
- The trained will commit to action and the untrained will descend into helplessness.

### Awareness – Preparation – Rehearsal

- **Awareness** – Involves taking the time necessary to gain a basic understanding of an active shooter or violent/emergency situation. Realizing violent incidents happen to everyday people is the starting point for developing a survival mindset.
- **Preparation** – There is no substitute for preparation. It includes looking at your environment through a survival lens, focusing on the “when it happens” and not the “if it happens” mindset. The “when it happens” scenario is critical in developing effective response strategies.
- **Rehearsal** – Involves practicing your plan. Practicing may include either mentally and/or physically walking through your “when it happens” plan. Rehearsing your plan will reduce response time and build confidence.

### How to Develop your Team and Training

The best way to develop any type of emergency response training is to ask: *What could happen? What early detection techniques can be employed? How do we respond quickly? What will we do in response? Who will do what? What will we do next?* Utilizing these questions will assist in development of your plan. Then, you ask: *How can we prevent it? How can we reduce or minimize harm to others? What will we do when it happens?* Remember, the goal is not to develop a church SWAT team, but to be ready and able to take action until help arrives.

### The Team

- Your safety/security team should consist of capable adults who are given specific responsibility for alertness and readiness to respond to emergencies or threatening situations. They could include:
  - Building/Grounds Engineer
  - Medical/EMS
  - Law Enforcement

- Ushers/Staff
  - Fire Service
  - Public Officials
- Assign a safety/security coordinator to oversee all safety and security plans developed and implemented by the church. This person would:
    - Develop and oversee the safety/security plan
    - Keep plan active
    - Keep the plan updated and effective for your specific location
    - Coordinate activities/training
    - Schedule regular inspections/assessments
  - Create and develop a plan with team members to address all relevant emergencies including weather-related, medical, and violent acts. Seek outside assistance from your first responders to develop and organize a logical approach to all emergency situations.
  - Your team should be trained to report anything they perceive as a threat or anything that makes them uncomfortable. They should be able to identify any type of threat to take appropriate actions. Individuals should be designated to observe certain areas of the church.
    - Narthex
    - Nave
    - Parking lot
    - Doors
    - Altar
    - Interior rooms

Take the opportunity to train with other ushers in your community. The more people involved with training, the more ideas that can surface. Keep in mind though, what works for one location may not be suitable for you.

### Training and Best Practices

- Early detection of a threat or emergency is critical to the outcome of your emergency response plan. Knowing that the majority of church shooters begin their path to the building in the parking lot, this should be a focal point when establishing your plan.
- Develop three circles of security for your church and/or other properties. Start with the parking lot, exterior/interior doors, and the interior of the church. Ask yourself how your plan will encompass these areas.
- Ushers should be trained to identify risks/threats. **Example:** *What if an usher identifies a person in the parking lot wearing a long coat and it is unseasonable for such attire? Are they concealing an assault rifle to use in an attack? Are they donning a backpack with extra ammunition?*
- Team members should consistently walk/view the grounds by going through the parking lot(s) in an effort to identify the potential for a threat. They can give the appearance as a greeter but at the same time, they are surveying the parking lot.
- Greeters could be trained to identify behavioral signs indicative of a potential threat. This might consist of a nervous or angered demeanor, sweaty palms or a confused look making them appear out of place.
  - Watch for suspicious behavior
  - Watch for signs of concealed weapons
  - Monitor who enters the choir loft
  - Monitor who enters restrooms/stairwells, etc.
  - Narthex and exterior of main entrance should be monitored always



- If you identify someone on or near the grounds that looks out of place, make certain they know you are watching them. If they were planning something, the mere fact that you have identified them might be enough to make them recant their decision. It is critical to have cell phone/radio procedures in place to alert other members of your team in the event of an emergency situation. *(Report all suspicions to law enforcement. Your report might be linked to another church's report with the same incident and/or individual.)*
- Have regular meetings with Team Members about what could possibly go wrong during mass. Discuss local or national events regarding issues that have occurred in other churches.
- Conduct a walk-through of the church/property prior to each mass or event to look for signs of concern. Prior to the arrival of parishioners, you should conduct a five minute briefing with your team to plan your role during mass or the event.
- Practice situational roles to develop techniques and methods of handling threats or disruptions at mass. This should be done for all ranges of incidents including weather related emergencies, medical emergencies, disruptive/unruly, combative and threatening individuals. Practice slow walk-throughs and real-time scenarios for your training. This will provide options for your emergency plan if scenarios are thought out in advance.
- Training should include assistance and protection provided to the elderly. Team members should have a method in place to assist with evacuation or protection to people unable to quickly and safely evacuate. In this case, you might implement your *Run, Hide, and Fight* plan for the elderly. Identify locations inside the church that can be utilized as a hiding place and/or barricade from a threat.
- Evacuation procedures within designated zones should be reviewed and practiced. Design evacuation zones with your church floor plan. It is important to establish an alternative evacuation area as the threat or emergency may make it unsafe to evacuate in that area.
- Training should be recurring with regular practice drills. The amount of training can be based upon the level of involvement of your Team Members. Play out an emergency scenario and review what went right as well as wrong.

We believe that church security is best accomplished through PREVENTION! You should not focus most of your energy on ways to handle just an active shooter. Instead, we believe you should focus your energy on being prepared to prevent all critical incidents and emergencies from occurring in the first place.

You are not alone in this fight. Law enforcement agencies around the world are developing action plans to address the crisis of mass shootings. As such, it is vitally important to utilize your public officials and first responders in an effort to develop your safety/security plan for all emergencies. Having a plan in place will offer a level of security and comfort to your parish and give you the best chance of reducing the potential for a threat. Should you have any additional questions, please feel free to contact your Risk Management office.

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**For additional information, please refer to the Risk Management section of the Diocesan website at:**

**<https://syracusediocese.org/risk-management>**