



## ACTIVE ARMED OFFENDER IN A HOUSE OF WORSHIP

While houses of worship traditionally are places of safety and peace, they are not immune to violence. While violence 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.

### 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 'Prevention' 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.

### PREVENTION

\*Not all risks or emergencies can be prevented, so the concept of prevention needs to have a much broader meaning, and should encompass activities that may reduce the severity or impact of the emergency event. General prevention-related activities can include gathering and analysing intelligence, developing strategies to reduce the impact on life/property and identifying or eliminating vulnerabilities at potential target sites. For most types of hostile attacks, prevention activities should aim to:

- deter a would-be attacker – by providing physical and electronic security measures, coupled with good management practices
- detect an intrusion – by providing alarm and visual detection/recording systems
- Delay or limit the intrusion for a sufficient period to allow a response force to attend – by putting in place measures that will potentially limit the movement of the offender.

For active shooter attacks prevention-related activities specifically aimed at mitigating or reducing the severity of the incident should also be considered. The main focus of those activities should be on restricting the movement of the offender/s while reducing their access to further victims. How to best achieve this will depend on many variables, such as the physical design and security features of the venue, the movement of the offender and the opportunities for escape/shelter in place.

Not all venues and events will share the same risk profile or have similar vulnerabilities, so the principle of 'proportionality' should generally be applied to any prevention-related activities.

This means that protective security measures not only need to be proportionate to the level of assessed risk, but should also try to strike a balance between the threat to public safety and the protection of civil liberties. However, when measuring proportionality it should be recognised that prevention and mitigation activities related to a specific threat may also provide broader crime prevention and public safety benefits.

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 health & human services department, your training department (if one exists), facility owners/operators, your property manager, and Police 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; Police; 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 armed offender training exercises. Police are 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
- Calling 000
- Reacting when Police 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 Police and first responders during training exercises
- Encourage law enforcement, emergency responders, SOG, 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:

#### Escape

Your priority action should be to remove yourself and others from close proximity to the offender/s, or areas that they might reasonably access. The following actions may influence the decisions you make in safely assessing your available options:

Under immediate attack – Take cover initially, but attempt to leave the area as soon as it is safe to do so.

- Leave most of your belongings behind (except for mobile phone).
- Do not congregate in open areas or wait at evacuation points.
- Provide guidance to people that might be unfamiliar with the area.
- Make good use of available cover and concealment opportunities.
- Consider (only as a last resort) options for arming yourself with improvised weapons to defend yourself in the event that you are located by the offender.

Nearby attack – Leave the area immediately and move quickly from where the attack is located, but only if it is safe to do so.

#### Cover from gunfire

- brickwork or concrete walls
- vehicles (engine block area)
- large trees and fixed objects
- earth banks/hills/mounds.
- Concealment from view (in addition to above options)
- building walls and partitions (internal and external)
- vehicles
- fences and other large structures
- blinds/curtains.

#### Hide

If you don't believe you can safely evacuate, then you may need to consider sheltering in place. Constantly re-assess the situation and your options based on the best available information.

- Avoid congregating in open areas, such as corridors and foyers.
- Consider locking or barricading yourself and others in a room or secure area.
- Secure your immediate environment and other vulnerable areas.
- Move away from the door, remain quiet and stay there until told otherwise by appropriate authorities, or you need to move for safety reasons.
- Silence mobile phones and other devices that may identify your presence.
- Try to contact police (000) or others to advise of your location and situation.
- Assess and re-assess better options for sheltering in place either within your current location or at an alternative location.
- Choose a location which may enable access to a more secure area.
- Consider (only as a last resort) options for arming yourself with improvised weapons to defend yourself in the event that you are located by the offender.

## Tell

The more information you can pass on to the police or owners and operators the better, but NEVER at the risk of your own safety or the safety of others.

If it is safe to do so, think about obtaining the following information:

- exact location of the incident
- description of the offender/s and whether they are moving in any particular direction
- details of any weapons being used
- number of people in the area and any that have been injured
- the motive or intent of the offender/s (if known or apparent).

Provide this information immediately to the police via 000 if this can be achieved safely. You may be asked to remain on the line and provide further that the operator requests or if the situation changes.

Consider providing information and advice to others that may be in your area that may be unsure of the current location of the threat and what they should do. Whether you are able to safely do this, and the communication methods available to you, will be determined by the circumstances and your own assessment of the situation.

## Police Response

In an Active Armed Offender scenario a police officer's priority is to protect lives. One of their priority actions to achieve this will be to locate the offender and effectively manage that threat as quickly as possible, which could mean initially moving past people who need help.

As more police resources become involved they will attempt to quickly provide support and guidance to persons affected by the incident.

At some stage they will conduct a 'clearance' search of the location to ensure that all persons involved or impacted by the incident are located, and to make the scene safe.

Please remember:

- Upon arriving at the scene, it is possible police officers may initially not be able to distinguish you from the offender(s).
- Police officers will be armed and could point guns in your direction.
- Avoid quick movements or shouting and keep your hands in view.
- They may initially move past you in search of the offender/s.
- Be aware that police may enter your location at some stage to secure the building and locate people that have hidden from the threat.
- Promptly follow any instructions given by emergency responders.

**IN THE RARE EVENT OF  
a firearms or weapons attack**

**RUN HIDE TELL**



## 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, Police will want to see evidence of such a bias motivation. Arguing heatedly with Police over the motivation behind the shooting will neither help the congregation heal nor contribute to Police'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.

### Disaster Backlash

It is possible that, after an active shooter situation, members of your congregation may 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 socioeconomic 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.

### 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 analyse 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 Police 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!

**WHERE TO SEEK FURTHER INFORMATION / HELP**

**Australian Federal Government:**

<https://www.nationalsecurity.gov.au/Securityandyourcommunity/Pages/active-armed-offender-guidelines-for-crowded-places.aspx>

**Victoria Police: 000**

**Lifeline: 13 11 14**

**Suicide Line: 1300 651 251**

**Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement: 1300 858 113**

**Mensline: 1300 789 978**

**Sane: 1800 187 263 [www.sane.org](http://www.sane.org)**

**Better Health Channel: [www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au](http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au)**

Adapted with permission from NYDIS

\*Australian Federal Government National Security – Active Armed Offender Guidelines for Crowded Places

<https://www.npcc.police.uk/StaySafeAssets/FINAL%20MPS168715%20Run%20Tell%20Hide%20A5%20fl%20Blk%20Eng%20v3.pdf>