

Armed security — is it a wise option for you?

Violence at worship centers—including numerous shootings — has religious organizations across the country struggling with the question of the need for armed security.

A violent act at a place of worship is almost always going to be one of the worst tactical situations you can create. It's a close, crowded area where 99.9 percent of the people are innocent bystanders.

In late 2007, a person entered a church in Colorado Springs, Colo., and opened fire. The armed security team at the church reacted and shot the gunman. There is no doubt the actions taken by the armed security person at the church saved lives, but it just didn't happen because the security person was armed. The team was aware of the potential threat because of an incident earlier in the week, and there was proper training, preparation, experienced personnel, communication and a plan in place for the threat. All of this came together. It just didn't happen because someone at the church had a gun.

The only viable reason to consider arming a security staff at your place of worship is to be ready and committed to the use of deadly force in a situation when it's called for.

Is your organization willing to make that call? Before making the decision, Church Mutual recommends you discuss the issue at length with your security team or safety committee and local law enforcement agency. Most police, sheriff and state agencies are interested in working with religious organizations regarding any security issue.

If you don't have a security team or committee in place, don't even consider putting together an armed security force — it's just one element of a comprehensive security plan.

Topics to discuss when considering armed security

- What risk is your organization facing that justifies this level of security?
- Has the pastor or other representative of your organization received threats?
- Do you have a high-profile person as a member?
- What other steps have you taken to prevent or reduce a violent incident from occurring at your facility?
- Do you have an unarmed security team already in place?
- Do you have a relationship with your local law enforcement agency?
- Does your state have a law prohibiting weapons, including concealed weapons, from being brought into places of worship?
- What risks are you creating by having armed security?
 - Shootout in your worship center
 - Innocent bystander is killed by your security force
 - Deadly force is taken when it isn't called for
 - Loss of membership due to new policy
 - Lawsuit against the church and the security personnel
 - Realize an armed security force will not prevent a violent incident from occurring at your facility.

Arming your security force

If your organization decides it wants to pursue an armed security force, here are some tips for your security plan:

- Discuss all aspects of your plan with your local law enforcement agency.
- Create a written security plan that includes a violence response plan.
- Notify your insurance company of your decision.
- Don't have your security force in uniform. Sometimes the uniforms act as targets for an unstable person wanting to perform a random act of violence. Uniforms can also deter members and guests from attending services. It's best if your security team blends in with the crowd.
- Allow only law enforcement officers to serve on your armed security force. (See below.)
- There is no training program a civilian can attend to be allowed to serve on your armed security force.

- Post notices that you are using armed security officers.
- Create and publicize that weapons are not allowed to be carried on your grounds by anyone other than your security officers.
- Know your state laws regarding the type of weapon your security force can carry.
- A background check must be performed on anyone who will be armed.
- Your organization is responsible for the actions of the security force.

Using law enforcement personnel is best option

The responsibility of being a weapon-carrying member of your security team is not small. Church Mutual feels the best plan is to utilize off-duty or recently retired law enforcement personnel.

- Law enforcement personnel are trained and supervised on a daily basis in their jobs.
- There's no substitute for the experience that a law enforcement officer gets on the street dealing with people on a regular basis.
- Law enforcement officers are not only trained how and when to shoot a gun at the academy, they're trained to learn how not to shoot one.
- Law enforcement officers in the field are accustomed to dealing with violent situations and threats. The first reaction is not to pull out a weapon; it's the last resort.
- If you're using retired law enforcement officers, ask how long they've been away from the job. Refresher training in combat shooting and crowd control is available for former officers.
- Most religious organizations that utilize off-duty officers look within their congregations first. The second strategy would be to contact your local law enforcement agency. Using officers may or may not require paying the officers.

Concerns with using private security companies

The risks of using a private security company that offers armed guard services include:

- Lack of acceptable standards in many states. There are no federal standards.
- Lack of proof of appropriate training and supervision for employees.
- Private security companies only have to meet a minimum standard of compliance for training and supervision. The highest level of training and discipline is needed for an armed security team at a worship center.
- Security company employees generally do not have the field experience of a law enforcement officer.
- This type of on-the-job experience cannot be duplicated in a classroom or training exercise.

Security experts provide wisdom, direction

This *Risk Alert* was created from information gathered during a panel discussion facilitated by Church Mutual. Members of the panel included:

- Chester Quarles - Professor of Criminal Justice at the University of Mississippi and 8-year veteran of various criminal investigating agencies. He also is the author of *Crime Prevention for Houses of Worship*.
- Ron Aguiar - Director of Safety and Security at Southeast Christian Church in Louisville, Ky. This church has 18,500 members with more than 1 million square feet of buildings on a 100-acre campus and utilizes an armed security force.
- Bob Klamser - 24-year veteran in law enforcement in California and co-founder of Crisis Consulting International, an organization that provides security and crisis management services to the missionary community around the world. He is also an associate pastor at Ventura Missionary Church.
- Carl Jensen - Assistant Professor in the Department of Legal Studies at the University of Mississippi and retired FBI agent with 22 years of experience.