

## Threats Against Houses of Worship Highlight the Importance of Religious Community Outreach

Houses of worship, faith-based organizations (FBOs), and faith leaders will probably continue to be targets for violent extremists adhering to different violent extremist ideologies, some of whom may be hate crime perpetrators. Enhanced communication, coordination, and training among federal entities, state, local, tribal, and territorial first responder agencies, religious community groups, and private sector partners can improve security protocols, increase awareness of suspicious activity indicators, and ultimately improve the ability to prevent, detect, deter, and disrupt potential plots.

**SCOPE:** This product raises awareness of potential threats to houses of worship, faith-based organizations, and faith leaders, regardless of type, sect, or denomination, and recommends best practices for engaging with religious communities.

Historically, violent extremists, some of whom are hate crime perpetrators, have targeted and encouraged the targeting of religiously affiliated facilities, events, people, and groups. There have been a number of high-profile attacks and plots against religious facilities across the United States in recent years. Violent extremists probably consider faith-based institutions to be attractive targets because of their symbolism, perceived lack of security, accessible locations, and violent extremist messaging glorifying past attacks and advocating future targeting.

- In March 2022, a federal grand jury indicted a Texas-based US person for crimes related to intentionally setting a fire at a synagogue in Austin in October 2021. The FBI searched the alleged perpetrator's residence and found handwritten journals containing statements related to the synagogue fire and statements demonstrating hatred of and contempt for persons of the Jewish faith. Charges are still pending.
- In January 2022, a UK citizen who had traveled to the United States the prior month held four people hostage at a synagogue in Colleyville, Texas, for more than 11 hours. The hostage taker was killed and hostages were released or escaped from the synagogue. The perpetrator was probably motivated in part by a desire to secure the release of incarcerated violent extremist Aafia Siddiqui, who is serving an 86-year federal prison sentence in nearby Fort Worth, Texas.

**NOTICE:** This is a Joint Counterterrorism Assessment Team (JCAT) publication. JCAT is a collaboration by the NCTC, DHS and FBI to improve information sharing among federal, state, local, tribal, territorial governments and private sector partners, in the interest of enhancing public safety. This product is **NOT** in response to a specific threat against the United States. It provides general awareness of, considerations for, and additional resources related to terrorist tactics, techniques and procedures, whether domestic or overseas. Consider the enclosed information within existing laws, regulations, authorities, agreements, policies or procedures. For additional information, contact us at [JCAT@NCTC.GOV](mailto:JCAT@NCTC.GOV).



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**CONSIDERATIONS:** Because religious-related events and structures—and those who attend or occupy them (clergy, staff members, and congregations)—are potentially at risk, first responders are encouraged to look for and develop engagement opportunities or expand existing programs and relationships with religious community leaders and congregations in their jurisdiction. Engagement supports information exchange, which can increase safety by ensuring reporting, vetting, and investigation of local threats or suspicious activities and awareness of all partners of the current local threat picture. The following are ways first responders can engage with religious communities:

**1. BUILD TRUSTING RELATIONSHIPS:** Law enforcement and religious community members can build a culture of safety and security by working together and developing relationships.

Strong partnerships are critical in the fight against terrorism. First responders who are already members of a religious community may serve as initial points of contact to create or strengthen community relationships. Recommendations include:

- Become familiar with the religious communities in your area of responsibility, including their leaders, facilities, and practices.
- Build ongoing and active working relationships with religious communities, their leaders, and the security personnel they employ.
- As permitted, meet religious community members at social hours, receptions, meals, and other functions to establish rapport.
- Support and promote outreach groups, such as interfaith councils, to build networks, provide education, and share accurate information on threats and attacks.
- Know the schedules for religious services and events, including festivals, picnics, guest speakers, concerts, special services, classes, or trainings.
- When possible, engage within a wider social context and address issues such as discrimination, criminal activity, access to social or economic support programs, and outreach related to general safety such as security seminars, fire-prevention inspections, and security-system testing.

#### Religious Community Members Can Serve as Important Bystanders

Bystanders play an important role in public safety because efforts to prevent terrorism are enhanced by the recognition, intercession, and reporting to authorities of pertinent concerning behaviors and indicators. *Engagement and outreach with religious community members can help equip bystander reporting and overcome obstacles to reporting.*

First responders can:

- Help religious community members understand the important role they play in terrorism prevention
- Provide guidance on what constitutes suspicious activity
- Inform them about the available opportunities to report pertinent suspicious information



**2. RAISE AWARENESS OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM:** First responders can inform faith leaders on topics related to violent extremism and connect them to resources and tools that are available on these topics. Recommendations include:

- Share information on the current threat environment; violent extremist groups and ideologies; common violent extremist tactics, techniques, and procedures; the process of radicalization; and mobilization indicators.
- Consider developing alternative, nontraditional, or low visibility means to conduct engagements, such as teleconferences for congregations that may negatively perceive the physical presence of first responders and security personnel, especially in uniform.

**3. PARTNER ON PREVENTION:** First responders can include faith leaders in terrorism prevention activities and programming that aims to proactively address risk factors, build or strengthen protective factors, and intervene with individuals who may be radicalizing or mobilizing to violence. Local stakeholders—such as faith leaders and congregations—are best positioned to identify early risk factors that may make an individual more susceptible and to intervene before violence occurs. Recommendations include:

- Consider training with religious groups and leaders to promote a common understanding of the indicators of radicalization or mobilization to violence.
- Involve faith leaders in multidisciplinary teams, diversion programs, and threat assessment and threat management programs.
- Collaborate with faith-based services in post-release re-entry programming to prevent recidivism.
- Provide bystander training to faith leaders and congregations to ensure individuals know how to report and what behaviors to watch for.

**4. SUPPORT SECURITY PREPAREDNESS TECHNIQUES AND BEST PRACTICES:** First responders can educate and highlight resources and tools, including federal grants, to help faith leaders improve the safety and security of their facilities. Recommendations include:

- Develop response and security protocols in conjunction with religious community security personnel to accommodate regular religious ceremonies and special events.
- Establish a multi-layered plan for security, identifying clear roles and responsibilities for developing and implementing security measures.
- Build out a mass casualty treatment plan, identifying trained personnel and designated areas for first aid, triage, evacuation, and accountability in the event of an emergency medical response. Work with FBO security to pre-position nonperishable emergency medical supplies like tourniquets, Mylar blankets, splints, and compression dressings in obvious locations.



- Assist faith leaders in creating emergency action plans, business continuity plans, and incident response plans that are well communicated, align with local law enforcement response, and exercised with first responders for complete understanding.
- Work to remove obstacles that complicate Emergency Action Plans. For example, consider removing barriers that would slow evacuations or flight during a critical incident, especially for individuals with disabilities.
- Apply physical security measures to monitor and protect the outer, middle, and inner perimeters, while respecting the purpose of each area of the house of worship.

#### SECURITY CONSIDERATIONS SPECIFIC TO HOUSES OF WORSHIP

- Religious facilities often publicize their meeting times and locations, including services and events such as festivals, picnics, concerts, special services, classes, or training, which is information that can be potentially useful to a terrorist.
- International issues may affect local religious communities because religious organizations sometimes have global ties or interests.
- Religious gatherings may occur in nontraditional houses of worship, such as movie theaters, office buildings, schools, and in homes, which may not have standardized or modernized security, including communications equipment.
- Special faith-based events may occur in nontraditional venues such as parks or on city streets.
- Services or ceremonies may involve separation practices based on gender, culture, age, or other factors. It is important to be aware of specific community sensitivities that may affect the ability to provide assistance during an incident.
- Some religious facilities or structures may be tourist destinations, with a limited security presence.
- Religious facilities may run or host activities at venues that provide a public service, such as schools, day-and after-care centers, donation sites, and food banks.
- Congregations may have internal security teams with a wide variety of training and equipment.

## RESOURCES

### DHS

- **DHS's Center for Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships** fosters partnerships between government and FBOs to increase the nation's resilience by creating trust and developing relationships. <https://www.dhs.gov/faith>
- **The Nationwide Suspicious Activity Reporting (SAR) Initiative (NSI)** is a joint collaborative effort by DHS, FBI, and state, local, tribal, and territorial law enforcement partners to provide law enforcement with a tool to help prevent terrorism and other related criminal activity by establishing a national capacity for gathering, documenting, processing, analyzing, and sharing SAR information. <https://www.dhs.gov/nationwide-sar-initiative-nsi>
- **DHS's Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA)** provides resources that assist in securing physical and cyber infrastructure and is committed to supporting efforts to maintain safe and secure houses of worship and related facilities while sustaining an open



and welcoming environment. <https://www.cisa.gov/faith-based-organizations-houses-worship?msclkid=0dc758b3aa9f11ec96a2861d078d5632>

- **The Houses of Worship Security Self-Assessment** is a baseline security self-assessment that is designed for a person, with little to no security experience, to complete a security assessment. The survey and guide are available here: <https://www.cisa.gov/publication/houses-worship-security-self-assessment?msclkid=0dc68d6eaa9f11ec8ed1c6997ff4dfb5>
- **CISA's Protecting Houses of Worship Video** informs the faith-based community of options for consideration to mitigate risk to places of worship and related facilities. [www.youtube.com/watch?v=iPhOH0C7cio](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iPhOH0C7cio)
- **Employee Vigilance Through the Power of Hello** provides stakeholders with information to assist in identifying and effectively responding to suspicious behavior. <https://www.cisa.gov/employee-vigilance-power-hello>
- **CISA's De-escalation Series** helps critical infrastructure owners, operators, and staff identify and navigate suspicious activity or potentially escalating situations to safely disengage and report to local law enforcement or their organization's multi-disciplinary threat management team. <https://www.cisa.gov/publication/de-escalation-series>
- **Tabletop Exercise Packages for Faith-Based Organizations** provides access to comprehensive resources designed to assist stakeholders in conducting independent exercises through a variety of scenarios. <https://www.cisa.gov/cisa-tabletop-exercises-packages>
- **CISA's Cybersecurity Catalog** is a single resource that provides users with access to information on cybersecurity services across all of CISA's mission areas that are available. <https://www.cisa.gov/publication/cisa-services-catalog>
- **Protective Security Advisors (PSA)** is a cadre of more than 100 subject matter experts located throughout the nation, available to assist houses of worship with vulnerability assessments, emergency action planning, and coordination. <https://www.cisa.gov/protective-security-advisors> or email [central@cisa.dhs.gov](mailto:central@cisa.dhs.gov)
- **DHS's Center for Prevention Programs and Partnerships (CP3)** works with communities to prevent targeted violence and terrorism. <https://www.dhs.gov/CP3>
  - **The Community Awareness Briefing** is a two-hour presentation that provides a foundation for communities across the country to learn about prevention efforts and radicalization to violence. The program provides communities with information and tools that are available to assist them with understanding the issues and learning more about how they can prevent targeted violence and terrorism within their communities. To request a community awareness briefing, please reach out to [CABriefingRequest@hq.dhs.gov](mailto:CABriefingRequest@hq.dhs.gov).
  - **Building Local Prevention Frameworks** provides an overview of local prevention frameworks, including some recommended first steps in building them. <https://www.dhs.gov/publication/building-local-prevention-frameworks>



- **Regional Prevention Coordinators (RPCs)** are stationed across the United States to help establish and support prevention efforts at the local level. RPCs help to deliver CP3's trainings, connect prevention practitioners, and build networks that can support local prevention frameworks. To learn more contact: [TerrorismPrevention@hq.dhs.gov](mailto:TerrorismPrevention@hq.dhs.gov)
- **DHS's Office for Bombing Prevention (OBP)** aims to enhance the nation's ability to prevent, protect against, respond to, and mitigate the use of explosives against critical infrastructure; the private sector; and federal, state, local, tribal, and territorial entities. <https://www.cisa.gov/office-bombing-prevention-obp>
- **DHS's Hometown Security Initiative** provides access to tools and resources to support community security and resilience. <https://www.dhs.gov/hometown-security>
- **FEMA preparedness webinars** are a series of preparedness videos that educate and empower the public to prepare for and respond to all kinds of emergencies. <https://www.fema.gov/emergency-managers/individuals-communities/preparedness-webinars>
- **The Active Shooter Web Portal**, a joint effort with DHS and FBI (within DHS's Homeland Security Information Network [HSIN]), provides a user-friendly environment to promote information sharing and collaboration between federal, state, local, tribal, territorial, private, civilian, and international entities working to help prevent active shooter incidents. <http://www.dhs.gov/cveas-portal>
- **State and Major Urban Fusion Centers** empower frontline law enforcement, public safety, fire service, emergency response, public health, and private-sector security personnel to lawfully gather and share threat-related information. <https://www.dhs.gov/fusion-center-locations-and-contact-information>
- **Office for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties (CRCL) Community Engagement Section** responds to community concerns and provides information on department programs, resources, activities, and issues. <https://www.dhs.gov/community-engagement>  
Contact: [communityengagement@hq.dhs.gov](mailto:communityengagement@hq.dhs.gov)
- **US Secret Service's National Threat Assessment Center (NTAC)** provides social science research and guidance in direct support of law enforcement, schools, government, and other public and private sector organizations to combat the threat of targeted violence affecting communities across the United States. The center's work includes studies on school shooters, mass attackers, and other public safety concerns. <https://www.secretservice.gov/protection/ntac>

## FBI

- **FBI's Community Relations Unit** at FBI Headquarters and FBI community outreach specialists in field offices across the country create and strengthen relationships locally and nationally with minority groups, religious and civic organizations, schools, nonprofits, and other entities. <https://www.fbi.gov/about/community-outreach>





- **FBI's Active Shooter Resources** is the FBI's webpage for information pertaining to active shooting incidents, resources, and training. <https://www.fbi.gov/about/partnerships/office-of-partner-engagement/active-shooter-resources>
- **The Behavioral Threat Assessment Center (BTAC)** is focused on the prevention of terrorism and targeted violence through the application of behavior-based operational support, training, and research. Encouraging bystander reporting is one of its top missions. Requests for BTAC assistance can be made through the Behavioral Analysis Unit Coordinator in your local FBI field office. <https://www.fbi.gov/services/cirg>
- ***Making Prevention a Reality: Identifying, Assessing, and Managing the Threat of Targeted Attacks*** is a practical guide on assessing and managing the threat of targeted violence and contains concrete strategies to help communities prevent these types of incidents. <https://www.fbi.gov/file-repository/making-prevention-a-reality.pdf/view>

## DOJ

- **DOJ's Community Relations Service (CRS)'s *Protecting Places of Worship Forum Facilitator Guide*** provides community leaders and local groups with instructions for planning and implementing the Protecting Places of Worship Forum. <https://www.justice.gov/file/1376631/download>
- **DOJ's Hate Crimes** is a comprehensive collection of DOJ's hate crime resources. <https://www.justice.gov/hatecrimes/resources>
  - Hate crime laws vary across states and across jurisdictions. Most states and US territories have hate crime statutes that are enforced by state and local law enforcement in state and local courts. Even if a state or territory does not have a law, hate crimes can still be reported to the FBI. For more information on your state's laws, visit <https://www.justice.gov/hatecrimes/state-specific-information>.
  - Report a Hate Crime: 1-800-CALL-FBI or submit a tip at [tips.fbi.gov](https://tips.fbi.gov)

## NCTC

- ***US Violent Extremist Mobilization Indicators (2021 Edition)*** is an NCTC, DHS, and FBI tri-seal product that provides a list of observable behaviors that could help determine whether individuals are preparing to engage in violent extremist activities. For inquiries or more information, contact [mib@nctc.gov](mailto:mib@nctc.gov) or visit <https://www.dni.gov/index.php/nctc-newsroom/nctc-resources/item/2272-u-s-violent-extremist-mobilization-indicators-2021>
- **NCTC's Radicalization and Mobilization Dynamics Primer** is a briefing on how and why individuals in the United States radicalize and potentially mobilize to violence. This offering can be accessed and requested by emailing [NCTC-Domestic-Reps@nctc.gov](mailto:NCTC-Domestic-Reps@nctc.gov).
- **NCTC Domestic Representatives** are stationed across the United States and can be contacted by emailing [NCTC-Domestic-Reps@nctc.gov](mailto:NCTC-Domestic-Reps@nctc.gov).



- **JCAT Website and Products:**

**FEDERAL GRANT PROGRAMS RELEVANT TO HOUSES OF WORSHIP**

- **DHS's Targeted Violence and Terrorism Prevention Grant Program** provides funding for state, local, tribal, and territorial governments, nonprofits, and institutions of higher education with funds to establish or enhance capabilities to prevent targeted violence and terrorism. Some of these resources are dedicated specifically toward empowering the reporting of bystanders. <https://www.dhs.gov/tvtpgrants>
- **FEMA's Nonprofit Security Grant Program** provides funding support for target hardening and other physical security enhancements and activities to nonprofit organizations that are at high risk of terrorist attack. <https://www.fema.gov/grants/preparedness/nonprofit-security>
  - E-mail to request an invitation to the Nonprofit Security Grant Program webinars: [fema-nsgp@fema.dhs.gov](mailto:fema-nsgp@fema.dhs.gov)
  - State administrative agency contacts: <https://www.fema.gov/grants/preparedness/state-administrative-agency-contacts?id=6363>
- **DOJ's Matthew Shepard and James Byrd, Jr., Hate Crimes Program** seeks applications for funding to conduct outreach and offer training on identifying hate crimes as well as to investigate and prosecute hate crimes. <https://bja.ojp.gov/funding/opportunities/o-bja-2022-171092>







## PRODUCT FEEDBACK FORM

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