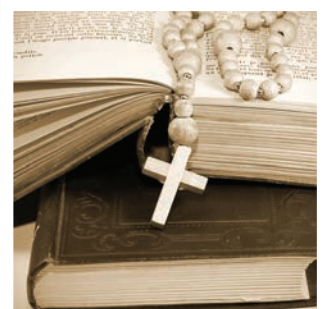# Proactive Security Guidelines for Religious Education Activities

Gallagher | RELIGIOUS PRACTICE

As we approach the one-year anniversary of the horrific school shooting in Newtown, Connecticut, we are reminded that tragedies such as these occur. Now is a good time for school administration and personnel nationwide to review and update school safety and security policies and procedures. While attention to safety and security is critical to ensuring a safe environment during the school day, it is just as important that this same focus (proactive) be applied to after-hour religious education programs. Each year many children attend these programs, which commonly take place after school hours or on weekends in facilities throughout the parish. To achieve a safe learning environment for both students and catechists, it is essential to choose a suitable building, where access to the facility can be controlled. It is also important to create and maintain an emergency plan, effectively communicate it and develop a safety and security culture.

Listed below are recommendations for best practices in building security. The Diocese and the entity will need to make necessary determinations as to what level of security best fits the situation.

Choosing an appropriate building

The parish school building is considered the best location for holding after-hour religious education activities. This is because the buildings are designed and constructed to provide occupants with a safe and secure environment These properties have typically been inspected by local fire departments, insurance company risk management/loss control consultants and other local authorities having jurisdiction that are required to comply with Life Safety regulations. School buildings are usually designed so that classrooms are adjacent to central hallways leading directly to a primary and secondary exit. In parts of the country where the climate is warmer, classrooms often exit directly to the outside of the building. In the event the parish is not able to use a school building, the following are important criteria to consider when selecting a building for religious education activities:

- Select a facility that is equipped with classrooms or similar meeting spaces that include an adequate number of exits to help ensure a quick evacuation. In accordance with Life Safety standards and concepts, a room or space serving more than 50 occupants is required to have at least two means of egress or exits.

- Ensure that each exit door in the building is equipped with locks that are compliant with all safety regulations to help ensure that occupants can exit the building without any type of restriction. Exit doors should open freely from the inside and not require the use of a key or other device.

- To help ensure access control and general safety, the facility should have a single point of entry and be equipped with adequate interior and exterior lighting to accommodate the drop-off and pickup of students.

- Establish a process for clearly identifying guests, staff and students prior to allowing access to the building for activities. This process should also apply to guests, staff and students that arrive on the premises after classes/activities have started and the doors are locked. For example, if a guest/student arrives late, this procedure would help building personnel identify the person prior to being allowed access to the building. The use of door buzzer locks, CCTV system or a staff member posted at the main entrance to confirm the person's identity by sight prior to granting entry, are all prudent precautions.

Control access to the facility

Access control, the careful restriction of access to a place, is the most important security measure to take. Give careful consideration to access control when selecting a location and/or when using a current facility. Access control measures include:

- Placing barriers such as fencing, locked doors, buzzer locks, or by posting staff members at various locations within the building to guide students/guests to the classrooms.

- If more than one door is being used for entry to the building, post staff members at each of the doors.

- Post meeting times and be sure that students are aware of these times along with the specific times that all doors to the facility will be closed and locked.

- Classroom doors should be locked whenever class is in session.

- Develop and utilize a student roster for checking students in and out.

Establish an emergency plan

An emergency plan is a crucial component of maintaining and securing a building. If utilizing a school building for religious education or other after-hours activities, be sure that the leadership/organizers are aware of and understand the facility's existing emergency plans and procedures. When creating an emergency plan:

- Require religious education activity leaders to develop an accountability system that prohibits the presence of unauthorized occupants.

- Utilize hall monitors when classes begin to ensure that unauthorized individuals are not in the facility.

Instruct religious education staff to perform a pre- and post-facility use security sweep, both inside and outside the building. Staff should be instructed to check that all windows and doors are locked and that window blinds are closed.

- Specify an appropriate ratio of supervisors to participants.

- Make sure that staff and students are aware of the locations of emergency exits, safe rooms and shelter areas.

- Coordinate emergency plans with local law enforcement/fire department personnel and provide these organizations with information on the dates and locations of after-hour religious education classes. Additionally, provide local law enforcement/fire department personnel with the contact information of the religious education leadership so that they can be reached quickly in the event of an emergency.

The following standards should be taken under consideration and reviewed for incorporation into the emergency plan:

Staff/Teachers/Students

» Review all safety and security protocols at the beginning of each semester/class session.

» Lock doors to all closets, storerooms, mechanical rooms, etc., when not in use. Prohibit students from entering dangerous areas such as mechanical rooms, storage rooms and server rooms.

» Verify all exterior doors are locked in a compliant manner, and keep them locked.

» Ensure adequate security lighting and notify the appropriate person if burnt out bulbs need to be changed.

» Instruct staff, organizers and students not to prop open perimeter doors for the purposes of convenience.

» Direct all visitors to the main office for formal sign-in and credentialing.

» Ask all unescorted visitors the nature of their visit with a greeting such as, "May I help you?"

» Personally escort unfamiliar visitors to their destination or contact person.

» Instruct staff, organizers and students not to open perimeter doors to provide access to any visitor.

» Be suspicious of any unusual activity, report it to the main office/leadership and follow procedures.

» Ensure that staff and organizers are familiar with all of the school's emergency procedures, including lockdown and severe weather procedures.

» Establish reporting procedures for safety and/or security issues that may arise.

» Develop and practice evacuation procedures that are consistent with the scope of the after-school activities.

» Develop and practice take-cover procedures (severe weather conditions, etc.) that are consistent with the scope of after-school activities.

» Develop and practice lockdown procedures (acts of violence, active shooter, etc.) that are consistent with the scope of after-school activities.

» Notify and train students on proper lockdown procedures.

» Involve students in all emergency and security-related exercises.

After-School Activities Organizers and Program Leaders

» Review all safety and security protocols in appropriate forums with organizers, program leaders and teachers on a regular basis.

» Communicate expectations regarding access control and prohibited areas within all buildings.

» Develop specific security protocols and provide appropriate instructions.

Provide effective communication

It is important for religious education leadership to understand the facility's communication resources and have a plan for communication if these resources become inaccessible or unavailable. For example:

• In some buildings, telephones may require the caller to dial "9" or input a code to obtain an outside line. In this event, all telephones should be labeled with the appropriate procedure to reach an outside line. Additionally, some phone systems may be automatically turned off after normal business hours, so confirm that the phones will be operable during the time of the after school sessions. Test phones within the facility on a periodic basis (e.g., at the beginning of each school year) to ensure emergency communications capabilities are working.

- Do not rely on personal cell phones as a primary method for communication, because in the event of an emergency, the cell phone towers may not be able to handle the increased volume of calls.

- Utilize two-way radios whenever possible because they allow for instant communication between staff members.

- Consider using a system that can generate mass notifications to parents of students in the event of an emergency. **(http://www.voiceshot.com/ public/urgentalert.asp?ref=UAEmergencyAlert_ mass+notification)**

It is our hope that another shooting such as the one that took place at Sandy Hook Elementary School last year never happens again. However, implementing strict guidelines to improve the security at facilities that host after-school religious activities will also improve the overall day-to-day safety at the facility.

The Gallagher Post will maintain an updated copy of this on the portal at www.gallagherpost.com

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