



HOW TO HANDLE AN EMERGENCY AT CHURCH

In the wake of the recent mass shooting in Las Vegas, the media has been dissecting the response to the crisis – by hospitals, police, emergency transport, concert venue, etc. It is clear that having a plan in place and training on how to execute the plan is vital to an effective response. Recent church shootings make it clear that emergencies do occur in churches. Having a viable response plan in place is critical to the safety and well-being of congregants, visitors and staff and will serve to minimize potential liabilities of the church for failure to appropriately respond.

THE BASICS:

- (1) **HAVE A PLAN**. Every church and faith - based organization with facilities should have a clearly articulated plan for responding to potential emergency situations which may reasonably occur in the facilities to safeguard employees, members, volunteers, guests and property. Protocols should be developed in accordance with local laws and regulations and after communications with appropriate civil authorities such as local police, fire fighters and emergency medical technicians.
- (2) **TRAINING**. Pertinent staff should be trained on these protocols. Doing so before an emergency ensues is key.
- (3) **EMERGENCY SUPPLIES**. Emergency equipment and supplies should be clearly marked, stored in easily accessible locations, and regularly maintained. Supplies may include: first aid kit, fire extinguishers, evacuation maps, flash lights, defibrillator, water/food if need anticipated.
- (4) **REVIEW & UPDATE**. Regularly.

EMERGENCIES TO CONSIDER:

- Medical emergency
- Lost child/vulnerable adult
- Power outage
- Violent behavior in building
- Natural Disaster before or during church event (*i.e.* snow or ice storm, hurricane, tornado, wild fire, flooding, mud slide, earthquake)
- Shooting
- Fire
- Water loss
- Outside threat
- Intruder
- Gas leak
- Accident during Church outing
- Cleanup of bodily fluids

For each of these emergencies that your church could reasonably anticipate, the plan should include detailed protocols.

WHAT PROTOCOLS: General Protocols should be established for the following actions. Each should clearly state who has the authority to direct the response, how it will be communicated and how the protocol will be accomplished.

- ✓ **Sheltering in place.** This needs to include the exact locations for sheltering, how persons get to that place.
- ✓ **Evacuation.** Should include evacuation procedure, routes and an identified meeting place.
- ✓ **Search for lost person.** Search procedures should be established.
- ✓ **Communications during emergency situations.** Identify who is responsible for communications, the method for communications, alternate methods if, e.g., loss of power renders one method unusable. Be sure there is a phone chain with emergency numbers to contact key staff quickly.
- ✓ **Directing of EMTs/ambulance.** Procedures should be established for who will meet first responders, routes of ingress/egress to be used that can accommodate a stretcher, if needed.
- ✓ **Cleaning of bodily fluids.** Procedures advised by Center for Disease Control can be adopted; Emergency supplies should include gloves and other items needed to follow these procedures.
- ✓ **First aid.** First aid should only be administered by someone trained or licensed, if appropriate, to do so; First aid supplies should be readily available in known locations, and supplies kept stocked.
- ✓ **Bad weather events during activities.** Protocols should be established for each reasonably possible weather event that could arise suddenly to ensure safety of those in the building. If the church may be called upon to serve as a safe center for others in the community especially if the event may be over an extended period of time, additional procedures and planning will be necessary.
- ✓ **Violence – actual or threatened.** Protocols should be established for potential violence from within and outside.

For each of these protocols, the following information should be provided: (1) **what** protocol should be enacted; (2) **who** has the authority to enact the protocol and to determine **when** the protocol is enacted; (3) **when** professional responders will be called in and **by whom**; (4) **how** will communications occur during the event; (5) who determines when the event is resolved, (6) **what** follow up is necessary, if any, and by whom.

WHAT LEGAL CONCERNS: Actions as well as failures to act when there is a duty to act, can lead to claims of negligence.

- (1) First aid being provided by untrained or licensed person which causes harm.
- (2) Failure to stock or have readily accessible first aid supplies.
- (3) Failure to comply with all local fire safety regulations including identified evacuation routes, fire extinguishers which are regularly serviced, smoke detectors, etc.
- (4) Poor communications during an emergency that delays critical response times.
- (5) Failure to call in professional responders, fire, police or EMTs timely or at all.
- (6) Security staff that poorly handles a violent incident.
- (7) Failure to take reasonable steps to keep members safe.

*Contact Erika E. Cole, Esq., The Church Attorney®, for legal assistance at 410.654.4300.
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