



# New NIJ App Helps HOUSES *of* WORSHIP *Plan for* SAFETY

*By Becky Lewis*

*Oak Creek. Charleston. Any number of other cities, small towns and rural roadsides where mosques, churches and synagogues have been burned and defaced. In today's world, the literal definition of the word sanctuary, "a place of refuge or safety," no longer seems to apply to houses of worship (HOW).*

*To the reality of those threats, add the "ordinary" crises of medical emergencies, lost children, custody disputes and natural disasters, and it's clear that just as schools began developing and implementing safety and security plans in the wake of Columbine and Sandy Hook, HOW leadership now needs to look to do the same.*

*To help them plan and become prepared to handle emergencies, the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) has released Safeguarding Houses of Worship, an app that helps a HOW assess its risk factors and start a draft plan that can be expanded and customized to meet its specific needs.*

Distributed through NIJ's Justice Technology Information Center (JTIC) to vetted public safety professionals, the Safeguarding Houses of Worship app can be a way for local law enforcement agencies to connect with HOW in their jurisdictions. Whether the agencies choose to work with HOW on a one-to-one basis or hold local workshops/planning meetings to discuss the need for a safety plan, the availability of the app helps law enforcement agencies work together with HOW to make communities safer.





“It isn’t just an assessment tool; it actually helps HOW write a plan,” says Ron Pierce, JTIC Deputy Director. “It provides guidance on the issues they should address and includes boilerplate policy language that gives them a good pathway to creating an expanded policy that meets their needs.”

Safeguarding Houses of Worship guides a user through a series of questions designed to assist a HOW in evaluating the current safety and security posture of a campus, as well as prioritizing threats and making recommendations for improvement. Template text provides assistance with developing job descriptions and policies and procedures;

as Pierce notes, the template text can then be revised, expanded and customized. Users are cautioned that safety plans are living documents that a HOW should periodically review and update as needed.

Safeguarding Houses of Worship builds, and expands on, design principles used by JTIC in creating School Safe — JTIC’s Security and Safety Assessment App for Schools, released in October 2015 to assist schools with performing security assessments of their campuses. NIJ and JTIC were working on the development of the school app in October 2014 when Todd Coleman approached them with the idea to create a tool for







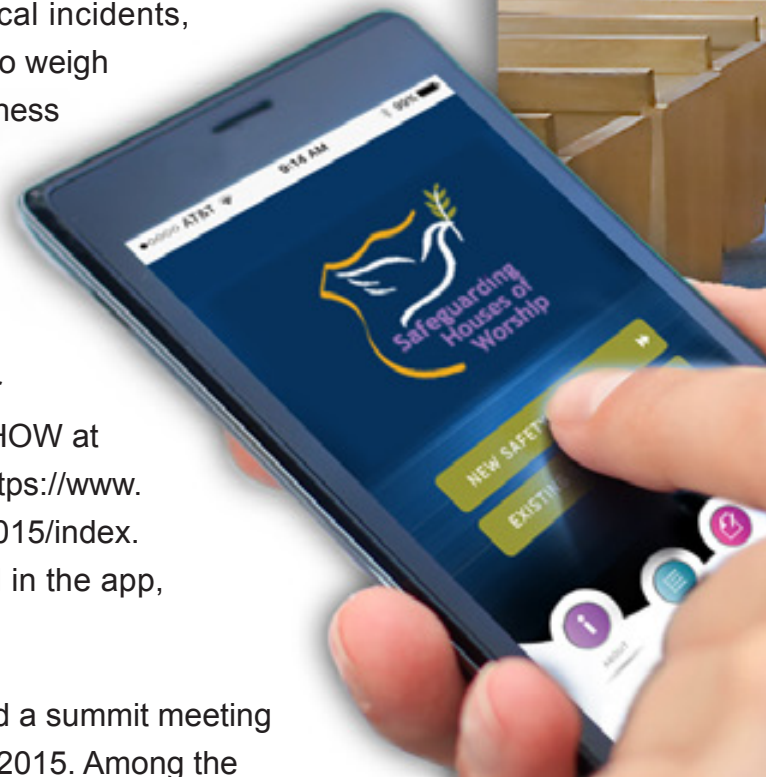
Safeguarding Houses of Worship walks the user through a series of questions and answers, marking a floor plan with critical points such as gas and water shutoff valves, taking an inventory of emergency management skills in the congregation and implementing recommendations on training for dealing with medical incidents, serious weather situations and missing children. It also asks users to weigh risks from specific hazards such as earthquakes, wildfires and nearness to a potential hazard such as a dam or a nuclear facility, and offers a glossary of relevant terms as well as sample forms for handling a bomb threat call, stocking a medical trauma kit and more.

“As we began the development process, we came across FEMA’s *Guide for Developing High-Quality Emergency Operations Plans for Houses of Worship* and became aware of ongoing efforts to assist HOW at DHS and FEMA,” Pierce says. (See *TechBeat*, March/April 2015, [https://www.justnet.org/InteractiveTechBeat/eTECHBEAT/eTechbeat\\_MarApr\\_2015/index.html](https://www.justnet.org/InteractiveTechBeat/eTECHBEAT/eTechbeat_MarApr_2015/index.html)). “After Charleston, there was quite a bit of interest generated in the app, and we began pushing to get it out as quickly as possible.”

Pierce experienced some of that interest firsthand when he attended a summit meeting on safety and security for HOW at Augusta University in November 2015. Among the participating organizations, he saw “great interest in what FEMA had done already and in what the app could do for them. Many of them had started plans that included fire drills, but they didn’t touch on how to deal with a lost child or an active threat, and they hadn’t thought about assessing their specific risk factors.”

Now, with the availability of Safeguarding Houses of Worship, HOW can assess these risk factors and create job descriptions, draft policies and more, all as part of an effort to keep their campus and the community safe.

*For more information and for instructions on obtaining the app, visit [https://www.justnet.org/resources/Houses\\_of\\_Worship.html](https://www.justnet.org/resources/Houses_of_Worship.html) or contact Ben Bolton of JTIC at [asknlectc@justnet.org](mailto:asknlectc@justnet.org).*







## PLAN ENSURES SAFE, SECURE, SMOOTH WORSHIP

Like Col. John “Hannibal” Smith of “The A-Team” television show fame, Bellevue Baptist Church Director of Security Andy Willis loves it when a plan comes together.

That is, when the plan is the Memphis facility’s security plan that worked flawlessly to stop a potential gunman on Easter Sunday morning.

Willis, a reserve officer with the Memphis Police Department who oversees security for the 377-acre, 1-million-square-foot campus, says Bellevue’s security plan is “more of a comprehensive operating structure involving not just identified security personnel but also our greeters, our ushers and really the laity in general.”

Bellevue’s plan starts with the volunteers who comprise the parking lot team. The volunteers are trained in basic behavior detection and in being very observant, especially in the visitor area, and they know if something seems off, they should call security. That emphasis on being observant continues inside the facility with the greeters and the ushers, and it played out exactly as it should have on March 27, 2016. One of the greeters noticed that a man was carrying a handgun in his pocket, and when this same man wouldn’t shake hands or take a bulletin, she became alarmed enough to report it to one of Bellevue’s ministerial staff. The minister walked into the sanctuary, where members of the congregation quickly told him they had also noticed the handgun. At this point, he called in Willis.

“When people come to church to come to church, even if they’re really broken, they don’t brush by you and refuse to shake your hand and look at you,” Willis says. “Instead, they’re desperate for someone to talk to, and the first person they see is going to hear the whole story. But someone bent on causing harm, unless he’s a trained operative on a mission, will likely try to not personalize what he’s about to do by not shaking hands or looking anyone in the face. We make sure the congregation members know if they see that sort of behavior, don’t just whisper ‘that guy looks odd’ to the person they’re with. Instead, they should engage the situation and call, text or tell someone. That’s what happened here on Easter, and the plan worked.”



Willis emphasizes that plans need to be as specific as possible rather than dealing in nebulous concepts. In addition to the behavior detection training given to specific groups of volunteers, Bellevue issues copies of a guidance checklist, created by Willis and based on several U.S. Department of Defense training materials. It's also important for the plan to have an integrated workflow, so that everyone knows the next step to take in the event an incident occurs.

"On Easter morning, I had about 40 security people in place and working," Willis says. "Probably 25,000 people came through here that morning, and even 40 paid professionals can't put their eyes on all of them. Rather than expecting security to also see the guns and thus know to take care of the situation, the minister followed the plan by calling me for help while choosing to follow this individual at a safe distance."

Because he received that prompt notification, Willis was able to follow through and engage the armed man in a manner that led to his eventual disarmament and arrest.

"For the most part, the members of the congregation didn't know anything had happened, and that's good. That's part of the plan," he says. "Our goal is always to support our mission, which in this case was to have a worship service. We wanted to ensure safe, secure, smooth worship, and we did."

"We can point to this incident and say 'this went according to plan, and we were able to do it without one shot being fired,' " Willis adds. "You can go forever and ever and ever and never have an incident, but if there's a day when the bad guy comes, you want to be prepared. You want to have a plan and you want it to work."

*For more information, contact Andy Willis at [AWillis@Bellevue.org](mailto:AWillis@Bellevue.org). Willis served as a member of the focus group that helped inform content for the Safeguarding Houses of Worship app during its development stage.*

*Photo courtesy of FEMA/Jannah Scott*

