WEAPONS AT WORSHIP

Armed Congregants & Considerations for Synagogue Security

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Secure Community Network SCN

Introduction

For many Jews across North America, the Hamas terrorist attacks against Israel on October 7, 2023, and the subsequent surge in threat incidents and acts of vandalism, harassment, and assault — occurring in cities across North America — have raised frightening questions and security concerns. Even more recently, the shooting at a Minnesota Catholic school during morning Mass in August 2025 has recentered the issue of violence against houses of worship in the national conversation. These events have prompted soul searching and questions of: Are we safe? How do we ensure our security? Should we purchase firearms, and, if so, where should we carry them? And most relevant to this paper: Should we allow guns into our communal spaces, including our houses of worship?

These questions are understandable. Given more recent events, they are also well founded.

In November 2023, a man fired shots at a synagogue in Albany, yelling "Free Palestine." In February 2024, an individual in Houston, Texas, carrying a rifle that said "Free Palestine," entered a church and was shot by off-duty law enforcement.

In the months leading up to July 2025, there were three acts of targeted violence directed against the Jewish community. During Passover, the Jewish governor of Pennsylvania's house was firebombed. Over a one-month period in the summer of 2025, two individuals were murdered outside a Jewish event, held at a Jewish venue, the Capital Jewish Museum in Washington, D.C., and an attacker threw Molotov cocktails at a group of people in Boulder, murdering one and wounding over a dozen.

These attacks are not just attacks on the Jewish community. They are attacks on religious freedom and, fundamentally, our democracy, undertaken by individuals who are shouting slogans associated with and promoted by terrorist organizations, and those who fund them. Those seeking to foment these attacks are interested not only in taking lives: they are seeking to destabilize our democracy.

Since October 7, the Secure Community Network (SCN) has tracked over 10,000 threat incidents, including nearly 600 on college campuses. In 2024 alone, SCN referred over 1,360 individuals to law enforcement. As of July 2025, our analysts have identified 500 threats to life, involving imminent potential violence and requiring rapid mitigation from police, since the beginning of the year. That number is projected to exceed 700 by year's end, a 40 percent increase.

Social media is currently littered with praise for the offenders in the D.C. and Boulder terror attacks. Users have posted, "Your local synagogue and JCC can double as a shooting range if you're feeling cheeky" and "No amount of fearmongering will stop us from supporting armed resistance to Zionism & imperialism… Globalize the intifada!"[1] In the week following the May 21

[1] @BXAntiWar, X post, retrieved 8/8/2025, https://x.com/BXAntiWar/status/1925912338021945483.

shooting outside the Capital Jewish Museum, SCN flagged nearly 6,000 violent threats online against Jews.

Over the past 20 months, every SCN intelligence brief shared with law enforcement has warned of this escalating threat. Online incitement from Iranian-linked actors, terrorist groups, and violent extremists, both foreign and domestic, is driving targeted violence against Jews. These actors justify violence under the banner of retaliation for Israel's actions, blurring the lines between protest and incitement.

Across these cases, SCN analysts identified online praise, glorification, and calls for replication, raising our concern about copycat attacks. While not every group is directly tied to designated terrorist organizations, many adopt their narratives, justify violence, and promote the "globalization of the intifada," a rallying cry now being echoed beyond just digital platforms and college campuses. These words are being shouted on our streets, written in manifestos, and hailed during targeted attacks alike.

While certain bad actors seek to take away the liberties and freedoms that all Americans enjoy under our Constitution and Bill of Rights, some members of the Jewish community are looking to more fully exercise the rights granted to them by these documents — namely those of the Second Amendment.

National reports show firearm sales and training have surged among the Jewish community in the years since the Hamas terror attacks on Israel, and as increases of hate and violence continue. This new reality invites new challenges for Jewish institutions that have always worked hard to balance a desire and commitment to be welcoming with a growing need to keep their institutions safe and secure.

At the Secure Community Network, we understand these challenges intimately. Many of us are former members of local, state, and federal law enforcement who have spent decades training on and carrying firearms. Many of us attend weekly religious services as well as High Holiday and other celebrations and religious events, across faiths. Our mission, grounded in the protection and resiliency of our communities, drives us to seek practical, effective solutions. SCN has consistently endeavored to provide resources and insights to our communities, to include some of the most complex and challenging ones.

Our efforts gave rise to two previous white papers: *Firearms and the Faithful: Approaches to Armed Security in Jewish Communities* in January 2020, and *Private Security: Window Dressing or Real Protection? A Roadmap for Securing Sacred Spaces* in April 2022. These publications aimed to shed light on the complexities of armed security and offer thoughtful considerations for Jewish institutions to make informed decisions on the subject.

Yet, as our engagement and dialogue with communities across the country have deepened, another pressing question has emerged: Should congregants be permitted to carry firearms within our sacred spaces? If so, who should bear this grave responsibility, and under what conditions? These questions are not just about security; they are about our values, our faith, and the very

fabric of our community life.

The temptation to turn to armed congregants for protection is understandable, especially when faced with escalating threats and constrained resources. The introduction of firearms into our places of worship is a profoundly serious decision, laden with complex implications and potential risks.

Against this backdrop SCN presents this paper. Our goal is to provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the risks associated with armed congregant programs and to illuminate the numerous factors at play for communities considering this option — and how to consider those factors.

As we navigate the complex times we live in, let us be guided by our commitment to safeguarding our community's well-being while maintaining the sanctity of our shared spaces. The road ahead is fraught with challenges, but with vigilance, forethought, and a steadfast dedication to our values, we can emerge stronger and more resilient than ever before.

Michael G. Masters
National Director and CEO
Secure Community Network

Executive Summary

In an era of rising threats to Jewish institutions across North America, congregational leaders face urgent and difficult decisions about how best to protect their communities. One of the most sensitive and consequential among these is the question of whether to allow firearms inside houses of worship — and if so, under what circumstances and controls. To address this, the Secure Community Network (SCN) convened a working group of experts from across law enforcement and security disciplines, and solicited input and feedback from leaders and organizations from the Jewish community and other faiths, to include organizations involved in volunteer safety and security. This white paper presents the culmination of their findings and recommendations.

The primary recommendation is as follows: If a house of worship is going to allow individuals to carry firearms, it must do so through an organized and structured safety or security team. This team should not arise informally or operate ad hoc. Rather, it must be formally established under synagogue leadership's oversight, led by a designated team leader, and governed by comprehensive policies covering team member selection, training (including ongoing exercises), vetting, use-of-force protocols, and coordination with law enforcement. These policies must comply with all applicable laws and be regularly reviewed by leadership, legal counsel, and insurers.

SCN's previous white papers advise that if a congregation determines that armed security will be a part of its plan, employing a uniformed police officer is the option most conducive to achieving its goals. The recommended best practice for armed security is employing an on- or off-duty law enforcement officer or a recently retired officer who continues to maintain relevant certifications and training. If an organization engages private security officers as a part of an overall security program, it must give more rigorous consideration to the selection, training, and oversight of private security officers who are hired to keep their communities safe.

While SCN continues to advocate for a comprehensive, layered security strategy that integrates trained professional personnel and physical security upgrades, we recognize that many congregations — especially smaller or resource-constrained ones — may seek to involve volunteers,

PRIMARY RECOMMENDATION

If a house of worship is going to allow individuals to carry firearms, it must do so through an organized, vetted, and well-regulated safety or security team. This team must not arise informally or operate on an ad hoc basis. Rather, it should be formally established under the oversight of synagogue leadership, led by a designated team leader, and governed by detailed, written policies. These policies must cover team member selection, background checks, training (including ongoing exercises), use-of-force protocols, and coordination with law enforcement. They should be reviewed regularly in consultation with legal counsel, insurers, and security professionals to ensure compliance with all applicable laws and best practices.

We do not recommend allowing individuals to carry firearms in their personal capacity outside the structure of such a team. Doing so introduces significant risks — including legal liability, safety hazards, and confusion in an emergency — and is inconsistent with the standards of responsible security planning.

including armed ones, in their protective posture. In such cases, allowing individuals to carry weapons without coordination, policy, or oversight poses grave risks — to safety, to legal liability, and to communal trust. Individual carry in an unstructured context is not a viable or responsible option.

This white paper builds on SCN's earlier guidance and draws from legal analysis, expert consultation, and community engagement to offer a practical roadmap for developing weapons policies. It outlines core legal considerations (including licensing and liability), policy frameworks, training requirements, and communications strategies to engage the broader congregation. It also highlights real-world models and best practices for congregations considering this path — and offers actionable tools to help them do so safely, legally, and in alignment with Jewish values.

HOW THIS PAPER WAS DEVELOPED

To support Jewish institutions in making informed, responsible decisions about the role of armed volunteer security teams in their security planning, the Secure Community Network (SCN) convened a working group of experts from law enforcement and the security field, beginning in August 2023. This group was tasked with identifying the core considerations, best practices, and policy frameworks that should guide congregational leaders navigating this complex and sensitive issue.

The white paper reflects a comprehensive effort by the working group, which included a review of armed volunteer security programs across the faith-based landscape, direct observation through site visits, and extensive interviews, information gathering, and analysis. Drawing from both national models and local experiences, the group identified key principles that any congregation should consider before adopting an armed volunteer security program. The result is this document: a set of clear, practical recommendations and guidelines for integrating armed volunteers — when appropriate — into a broader, professionally informed security strategy.

Jewish Federations of North America

CONFERENCE OF PRESIDENTS of Major American Jewish Organizations

The Secure Community Network, the official safety and security organization of the Jewish community in North America, was founded under the auspices of Jewish Federations of North America and the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations.

DISCLAIMER: These guidelines are for informational purposes only. Secure Community Network advises seeking professional security advice tailored to your situation. SCN makes no representation, guarantee, or warranty that adopting any recommendation presented here will ensure that your facility or users will be invulnerable to attack or crime. SCN shall not have any liability because of any decision by you to adopt or not adopt any part of these guidelines. These guidelines are copyrighted property of SCN and may not be copied, reproduced, republished, posted, transmitted, distributed, or changed without the prior written permission of SCN.

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Foundations for a Holistic Security Strategy

Take a Comprehensive Approach

The question of "weapons at worship" is not a "yes" or "no" proposition. There are many options to consider and a broad spectrum of permissions that can be granted. This paper is intended to be a primer of key considerations when weighing the establishment of an armed volunteer security program, but it is advisable to take a comprehensive approach to gathering information and considering all available options.

For more information on approaches to armed security, we recommend consulting our previous papers, *Firearms and the Faithful: Approaches to Armed Security in Jewish Communities* and *Private Security: Window Dressing or Real Protection? A Roadmap for Securing Sacred Spaces* on our website or by requesting a hard copy.

For many congregations, a comprehensive review of the risks and potential benefits of an armed volunteer security program will lead to the conclusion that a limited range of permissions — or even an outright ban on firearms — may be the most prudent path forward: because of the dangers inherent in allowing deadly weapons on site, it is better not to have firearms than to have poorly organized or insufficiently trained armed congregants. Therefore, if you allow armed individuals, it is essential that you take the necessary steps and precautions to do it correctly.

> **"The wrong policy will almost certainly make your congregation *less* safe instead of more."**
>
> **James Somohano**
>
> Director of Community Security,
> Greater Miami Jewish Federation

When assessing security options, always consider the range of less lethal force options available as an alternative to firearms. This can include non-lethal tools like chemical sprays, impact weapons, and tasers — each offering a defense strategy that minimizes risk while maintaining a focus on de-escalation and compliance. As with any security measure, less lethal force options must be accompanied by stringent policies to govern their

use, rigorous training to ensure safe handling, and clear guidelines for maintenance and storage. Many of the safety and training measures outlined in this paper can also be applied to less lethal force options.

Distinguishing Between Security Teams and Individual Carry

When considering whether and how to allow armed congregants in a house of worship, it is essential to distinguish between allowing participation in a **formal security team** and allowing **individual carry** in a personal capacity. While both may involve congregants carrying firearms, the context, risks, and responsibilities differ dramatically — making only one of them a viable option.

We do not recommend allowing individuals to carry firearms solely for personal defense while attending services or events as worshippers. Even when permitted by law, this approach poses significant challenges: it is difficult to regulate, opens the congregation to substantial legal liability, introduces uncertainty for law enforcement in the event of an incident, and risks turning moments of crisis into chaotic and dangerous encounters. Most importantly, "individual carry" lacks the oversight, coordination, and accountability necessary to ensure a safe and effective security posture.

Instead, we recommend that any armed presence in a house of worship be structured through an organized, synagogue-sanctioned security team. **Such teams should be purpose-built with clear roles and responsibilities, trained for threat recognition and response, coordinated with local law enforcement, and governed by policies that ensure legal and ethical accountability.** Throughout this paper, the guidance and recommendations assume this team-based approach over the individual carry approach.

Setting up, training, and maintaining an armed volunteer security team is a complicated and resource-intensive endeavor that should not be undertaken lightly. The primary role of the team during services or events is to provide security for the facility and congregation. Thus, team members need to undergo formal training and may need to obtain special licenses and insurance. Additionally, their actions need to be governed by a clear set of policies and procedures.

REMEMBER

Not allowing firearms at all is a perfectly viable policy. This paper does not recommend that every house of worship establish an armed volunteer security team. Rather, we are recommending it as the better of two options for those communities that do choose to allow armed congregants.

Part of a Larger Plan

Many communities assume that having armed security is a security plan in and of itself. They are mistaken. Armed security is not enough to ensure your organization's safety, and if handled improperly, it could expose your congregants to danger and extensive liability. Best practice is to make the armed component a piece considered for a safety and security plan.

As noted in our first paper, *Firearms and the Faithful*, an armed security program should be part of a larger plan that also includes other tactics, such as:

- **Threat, Vulnerability, and Risk Assessments:** Conduct regular evaluations to identify potential security gaps and proactively address them before they can be exploited.
- **Establishing a Security Committee:** Have a security committee and/or an identified security director to coordinate security efforts.
- **Coordination with Law Enforcement:** Establish relationships and coordinate closely with law enforcement on preparedness, protection, prevention, and response.
- **Congregant Training:** Provide education and drills for congregants to ensure they know how to respond in various emergency situations, enhancing overall preparedness and safety.
- **Implementing Security Solutions:** Strategically deploy physical security measures such as secure entry points, barriers, and reinforced infrastructure to deter or mitigate threats.
- **Technology such as CCTV:** Incorporate surveillance systems to monitor activities, deter potential aggressors, and provide valuable information during and after an incident.
- **Utilizing Ushers and Greeters to Watch for Suspicious Activity:** Engage these front-line volunteers not just in welcoming but in identifying any unusual behavior or potential threats.
- **Immediate Notification of Police:** Remember that police response time does not start until someone calls 911. It is important to immediately notify police through a 911 call or activation of a panic alarm button when an incident begins.

Engaging Your Congregation

Community engagement lies at the heart of formulating any security measure, especially one as potentially significant as an armed volunteer security program. It is essential to strike a balance between maintaining an effective security strategy and ensuring that congregants feel safe, informed, and supported. To help your community feel safe, it is always good practice to "seek first to understand, then to be understood."

This could mean convening a formal committee to either develop recommendations from scratch or approve an already assembled policy document. Or it could mean undertaking an informal process of gathering input and soliciting ideas from key community members. Either way, be sure to document this phase so that it is clear you did not set the policy unilaterally.

Here are a few key constituencies that can be included in the policy-setting process.

- **Board of Directors or other leadership:** Seek input upfront from anyone whose buy-in you will need for the final policy. Let them know why it is important to have a policy. Solicit their thoughts and ideas. Ensure you are aligned on the process for determining and setting the policy. Ensure they know you will seek legal counsel and guidance. Ensure they understand your budget requirements to not only start the program but sustain the program over time.
- **Lay leaders of your congregation:** Does your organization have consensus leaders from among the membership? If so, you will want to consult them. For one, this is an important way to preempt criticism from some community members who may be unhappy no matter what you choose.

Consulting Law Enforcement

These agencies will provide valuable guidance on a range of issues, including weapons laws and permitting processes, use-of-force standards, communication protocols, and active threat response procedures. They can also help assess your facility's vulnerability, review your proposed policy for potential gaps, and recommend training or coordination exercises to prepare your team for real-world scenarios.

In addition to shaping your policy, these conversations build trust and transparency. Law enforcement officers will be far better equipped to respond effectively to a crisis if they are already familiar with your facility, your team, and your protocols. Early engagement can also help clarify what will happen when officers arrive on scene — including how to identify armed volunteers and avoid tragic misidentifications. This will be covered further in the General Policy Considerations section.

Whatever direction your congregation takes, a close, ongoing relationship with law enforcement is not optional. It is a critical element of any serious, responsible approach to community security.

Understanding the Regulatory Landscape

When it comes to the safety of your community, knowledge of the law is the first step. Taking the time to understand all the laws, regulations, and best practices governing your security can save you headaches, heartache, and financial strain in the long run. It can also save lives.

ARE YOU REQUIRED TO ALLOW CONCEALED CARRY IF YOUR STATE DOES?

Just because your state allows concealed carry for all eligible individuals does not mean your organization necessarily must. Legal counsel can help you determine if your state law allows you to be more restrictive than state concealed carry laws. If you are permitted to deny concealed carriers the option of bringing guns onto private property, you should post your firearms policy using that legally prescribed language.

Laws: The Bedrock of Your Security Approach

Laws vary tremendously from region to region, state to state, and even city to city. When determining your armed congregant policy, do not rely on hearsay or online resources. Consult with legal counsel, especially those familiar with local firearm and security regulations.

Some of the many legal considerations include:

- **Employee or Volunteer:** How you classify your security personnel is crucial. Offering any form of benefits, even free food or reduced membership dues, may inadvertently classify them as employees, opening up a different set of obligations.
- **Firearm Type:** Every state has different laws regarding the type of firearm one may carry and for what purposes.

- **Carry Zones:** Most states have restrictions on where firearms can be carried, even with a permit (e.g., schools, community centers, or houses of worship).
- **Mental Health Evaluations:** If you are assembling an armed volunteer security team, some states or insurers will consider team members armed security guards and require mental health screenings.
- **Notification Requirements:** Do local laws require signs or other forms of notification if firearms are on the premises? Conversely, do local laws require signs or other forms of notification if firearms are not permitted?
- **Storage and Accessibility:** Are there legal requirements or best practices for how firearms should be stored when not in use, especially in places frequently visited by children?
- **Reciprocity with Other States:** For communities near state borders, it is important to know if and how firearm permits are recognized across state lines.
- **Regular Re-evaluation and Recertification:** Are there legal requirements for periodic retraining or recertification? Who will track and ensure compliance?
- **Ammunition Restrictions:** Some states have restrictions on bullet capacity and types of ammunition, making it important to train security personnel on these nuances.

This is not an exhaustive list, and the specific laws applicable to you will depend on where you live and the policy you are considering. This is why it is important to work closely with legal professionals familiar with local and state firearm laws to navigate this complex terrain.

BEST PRACTICE

As a first step in devising your policy, seek legal counsel — ideally from an attorney with knowledge of your state's firearm and security laws.

WHAT IS H.R. 218?

H.R. 218, or the Law Enforcement Officers Safety Act, was signed into law in 2004 and sets out regulations for the training and qualifications of active and retired law enforcement officers. Under this federal law, qualified active and retired officers are permitted to carry concealed firearms, including in jurisdictions that might otherwise prohibit it. This law only applies to those armed for personal defense and is not meant for the protection of people and property.

Licensing and Permitting

It is also important to understand state laws surrounding licensing and permitting. In some states, anyone over age 18 who meets basic criteria can carry a concealed firearm without going through a permit process. Other states require a permit, but qualifications, training, and screening requirements still vary greatly.

Learning what is and is not required to obtain and maintain a license in your state is important, in part, because it shows what qualifications your congregants may still need. If you are in a state with less restrictive licensing criteria, you may want to require extra training or background checks beyond the legal requirements.

Some of the many legal considerations include:

Type of License

- **Concealed vs. Open Carry:** It is important to understand the difference and what requirements your state imposes for each.
- **Private Security License:** If your organization is considering a dedicated security team, even if unpaid, each individual may need a private security license.
- **Private Armed Security License:** This is a specialized form of licensing for security personnel who will be armed as part of their duty.
- **Special Endorsements:** If your facility is considered a sensitive area, like a school or house of worship, your state may require special endorsements or permissions to carry firearms.

Eligibility Criteria

- **Criminal Record:** What is your state's policy regarding criminal background checks? Your organization should ensure that armed individuals do not have a criminal history.
- **Mental Health:** Even if a jurisdiction does not require mental health assessments for individual licensing, an organization might want to consider a psychological evaluation as an added safety measure for members of security teams.
    - **Drug Testing:** While not always mandated by law, implementing a policy for regular drug testing can be a crucial step in ensuring that members of the security team are not impaired, thereby maintaining a high standard of reliability and safety.
    - **Alcohol Avoidance:** While serving in an official security capacity, security team members must be barred from consuming alcohol. This is particularly important for holidays and celebrations where alcohol may be served on premises.

Training Requirements

- **Firearm Safety & Shooting Proficiency:** Some states require training and shooting qualification for concealed carry permits, while others do not.
- **Legal Education:** Even if the individual has received training as part of their licensing, the organization should offer or mandate periodic refreshers, especially if laws change.

REMEMBER

Do not assume a person who is permitted by state law to have a firearm is sufficiently trained to handle that firearm in a moment of crisis. It is advisable to require training and background checks that exceed the minimum legal requirements in your state or jurisdiction. For more information, see the sections of this paper on screening, vetting, and training your security team.

Liability Considerations

Anytime armed individuals enter your premises, there is potential legal liability, both civil and criminal. Short of death, an organization can be held liable for personal injury and property damage.

It is critical to have liability insurance. In fact, consider being double insured: meaning the institution is insured, and each individual member of your security team is also insured. On the organizational level, it could be an existential threat to be underinsured. Inadequate training can lead to accidents or misuse of force, opening up devastating lawsuits and financial liabilities for individuals as well as the organization. On the individual level, you need to protect yourself to protect others.

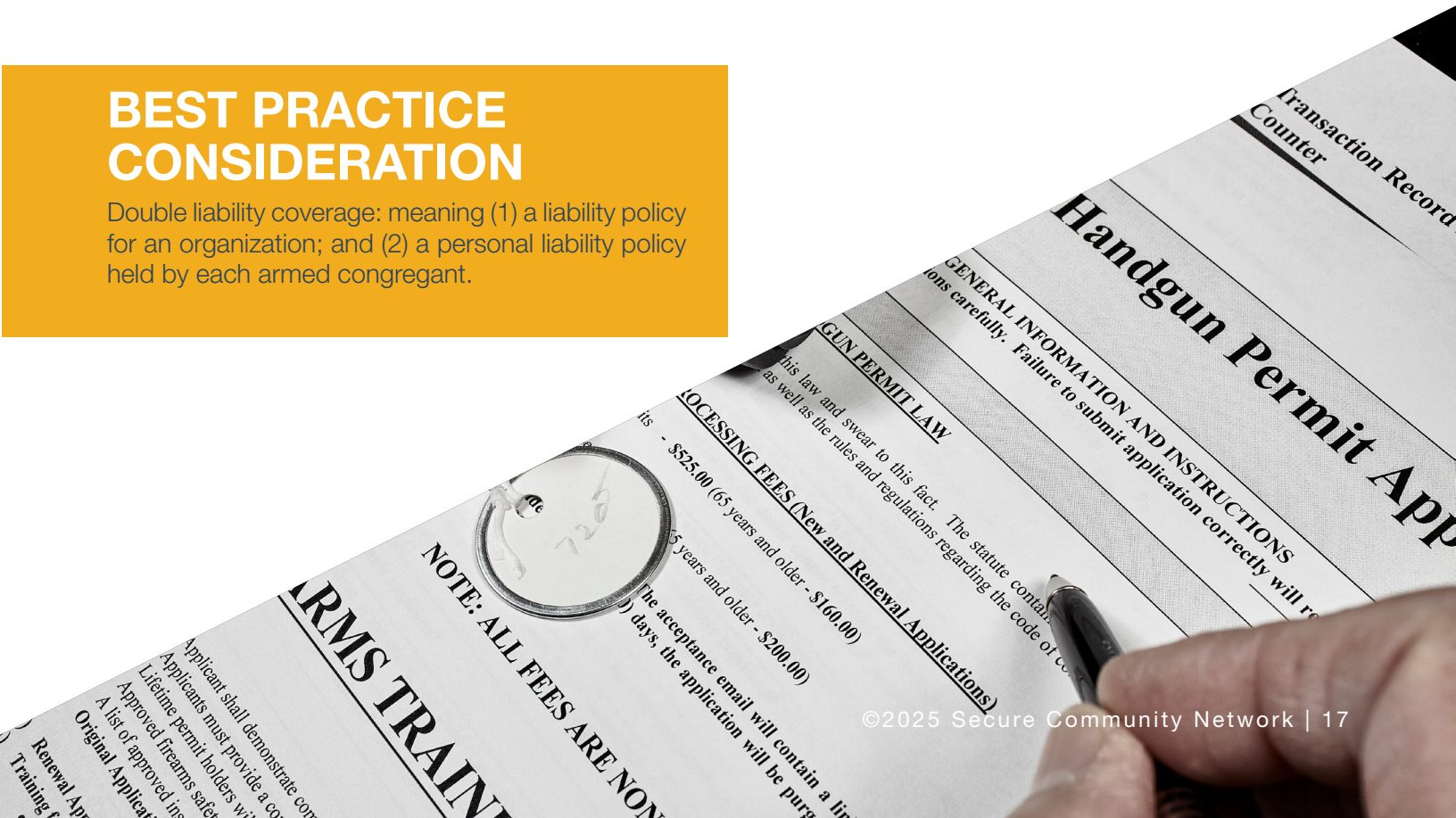
Make sure your insurance carrier knows the particulars of your policy upfront and be sure to keep them up to date on any changes. Be advised that there are multiple insurers who specialize in house of worship insurance. Consider seeking out the best policy to fit your needs, then consulting with legal counsel and your insurance carrier.

REMEMBER

One of the best ways to limit liability is to have a clear firearms policy in place and to communicate it to members, visitors, and local law enforcement. This way, anyone who violates the policy does so at their own risk.

BEST PRACTICE CONSIDERATION

Double liability coverage: meaning (1) a liability policy for an organization; and (2) a personal liability policy held by each armed congregant.



Policies and Procedures

Creating a Policy is the Most Crucial Step

When it comes to the issue of firearms in Jewish houses of worship, the first objective of any institution must be to create a clear policy. While the decision to allow armed congregants is fraught with complexities, the decision to establish a policy should not be. It is the most critical step toward ensuring the security of our sacred spaces, a step that affirms our commitment to vigilance, preparedness, and the preservation of our communal life.

In this era of escalating threats, many organizations have lacked clear guidance on how to approach armed security. Not knowing what questions to ask or whom to ask, many have accepted the idea that allowing armed individuals inside their congregation is ultimately unavoidable but have not considered the question of how to do so safely, responsibly, and in a manner that best ensures the protection of the congregation. Lacking clarity or direction, organizations may resign themselves to turning a blind eye or opting for a "Don't ask, don't tell" approach. Unfortunately, this can cause confusion and incur liability while jeopardizing the safety of the congregation.

"If you know people are carrying firearms and you intentionally don't make a policy, your policy is that people can do whatever they want."

Thomas Baugher, Community Security Director,
Jewish Federation of Sarasota-Manatee

By not having a firearms policy, organizations are permitting individuals to bring firearms onto the premises to whatever extent is allowed by state law. This could make one's organization liable for any damage or injury that the individual carrying the firearm may cause.

It is critical for each organization to go through the process of developing a firearms policy based on best practices, clearly informing their congregation, local law enforcement, and all visitors of that policy, and sticking to it with enforcement and accountability measures, to include regular safety checks.

KEY RECOMMENDATION

Create a firearms policy for your organization. Do not leave the issue of whether firearms are in your facility — or who has them — up to chance.

Develop a firearms management policy:

- **Safety Rules:** Establish clear guidelines on firearm safety to prevent accidents and ensure responsible handling at all times. At a minimum, this should include the four cardinal firearm safety rules (see side bar for details).
- **Firearms Handling:** Define protocols for how firearms are carried, drawn, stored, and used to maintain a high standard of security and safety.
- **Mandatory Trainings:** Consider how individuals will be qualified and trained (see Chapter 4).

FOUR PRIMARY RULES OF FIREARM SAFETY

1. **Always keep firearm pointed in a safe direction:** Never point your gun at anything you do not intend to shoot.
2. **Treat all guns as though they are loaded:** By treating every firearm as if it is loaded, a habit of safety is developed.
3. **Keep your finger off the trigger until you are ready to shoot:** Never touch the trigger on a firearm until you actually intend to shoot.
4. **Always be sure of your target and what's beyond it:** Don't shoot unless you know exactly what your shot is going to strike. Be sure that your bullet will not injure anyone or anything beyond your target.

As stated above, less lethal force options can be a valuable alternative or supplement to firearms. As with firearms, proper management and safety policies must be set and enforced for less lethal options.

Develop management policies for less lethal use of force:

- **Chemical Spray:** Set guidelines for the use, storage, and training requirements of chemical sprays (such as pepper spray) as a non-lethal defense option.
- **Impact Weapon:** Define protocols for the use, training, and storage of impact weapons (such as batons) to ensure they are used appropriately and safely.
- **Taser:** Establish clear policies for the use, training, storage, and maintenance of tasers as a less-lethal option, ensuring legal compliance and safety.

Cassidy, D. (2021, July 5). 4 Primary Rules of Firearm Safety. NSSF. https://www.nssf.org/articles/4-primary-rules-of-firearm-safety/

> **“Security isn’t just about responding to threats; it’s also about preempting them.”**
>
> **Kerry Sleeper**, Deputy Director, Threat Management and Information Sharing, Secure Community Network

Parameters of Performance

“Parameters of performance” refers to the set of criteria and expectations that outlines the role of an armed individual serving as part of your security team. These parameters provide clarity of mission, define appropriate behavior, and help ensure that every armed team member understands the scope and limits of their authority. Without clear parameters, even a well-intentioned volunteer can act in a way that endangers others, creates legal exposure, or disrupts emergency response protocols.

A well-defined performance framework should include:

- **Primary Responsibilities:** The core duty of an armed volunteer security team member is to protect life. That responsibility may include serving as a visible deterrent, maintaining situational awareness, reporting suspicious behavior, and responding to a clear and imminent threat — but not engaging in broader policing functions or escalating confrontations unnecessarily.
- **Rules of Engagement:** Armed volunteer security team members must understand precisely when they are authorized to use force and, equally important, when they are not. These rules should be embedded in your congregation’s use-of-force policy and aligned with applicable state and federal laws.
- **De-Escalation First:** Armed volunteer security team members should be trained in verbal de-escalation and non-lethal options. The use of a firearm must always be a last resort, reserved for life-threatening scenarios when no other option exists.
- **Team-Based Response:** Armed volunteer security team members must act within a coordinated structure. They should never act independently, unless circumstances absolutely require it and communication with the team is impossible. Regular training and exercises should reinforce coordinated response protocols.
- **Duty Boundaries:** Armed volunteer security team members are not present to enforce synagogue rules, mediate disputes, or control crowd behavior unrelated to a security threat. Their sole role is to provide a life safety function under specific, high-risk conditions.
- **Communication and Reporting:** Every armed volunteer security team member must understand the chain of command, how to report concerns or incidents, and how to interact with law enforcement during and after a critical event.

By clearly articulating these expectations — in writing, in training, and through regular drills — congregations can empower their armed volunteer security teams to act decisively and appropriately when it matters most.

BEST PRACTICE CONSIDERATION

Secure your perimeter. To the maximum extent possible, you want to evaluate threats, conduct searches, and engage suspicious actors outside the facility. This is important as a security best practice and also as a means of preserving the sanctity of your space.

Use of Force Policy

A "use of force" policy delineates when and how a person can apply physical force, especially in situations that may escalate rapidly. It stipulates the conditions under which different levels of force, from verbal warnings to the use of a firearm, are deemed appropriate. The best use of force policy examples can be obtained from law enforcement.

Before setting up an armed volunteer security team, it is essential that you prepare a use-of-force policy. In addition to engaging with your legal counsel, engaging with your local police department on these issues can be invaluable. Officers can offer insights drawn from their own stringent training and operational experiences, ensuring that your guidelines are both effective and responsible. A use of force policy should also include reporting and training requirements.

Just like law enforcement officers, members of an armed volunteer security team should use only the amount of force necessary to protect themselves or others from harm. The levels of force range from basic verbal tactics (requests, instructions, commands) to physical tactics (empty-hand control techniques) to less lethal force (chemical spray, baton, taser) to lethal force.

The Department of Justice use of force policy was approved by the heads of the FBI, Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF), and the U.S. Marshals Service (USMS). It is included at the end of this paper in an appendix. It states that "(Defenders) may use deadly force only when necessary, that is, when the (defender) has a reasonable belief that the subject of such force poses an imminent danger of death or serious physical injury to the (defender) or to another person."

Always keep in mind that your armed volunteer security team members are civilians rather than police, so they lack the qualified immunity — or protection from civil and criminal liability — of law enforcement officers. It is important to understand their legal rights, as well as the rights of any potential subject or suspect that your security team may confront.

At a minimum, the following concepts should be considered when developing a use of force policy:

- **Consult and retain legal counsel.**
- **Research and know local/state use of force case law.**
- **Conduct use of force training.**
- **Document and maintain records of use of force training.**
- **Develop a use of force reporting mechanism.**
- **Document and maintain records of use of force incidents.**
- **Develop a use of force supervisory, accountability, and review process.**
- **Always remember that armed volunteer security personnel are not law enforcement.**

Let us further explore the complexities surrounding the use of force, its legalities, and best practices.

Defining the Use of Force

- **When is it authorized?** The right to use force as a civilian typically springs from imminent threat situations. However, the exact nature and degree of threat that legitimizes force varies by jurisdiction. Always be guided by local laws.
- **A Full Spectrum:** Between words and shooting lies a spectrum of less lethal options like pepper spray and tasers. Consider these methods when developing your use of force policy, and if you use them, you must ensure your team is trained in their application.
- **De-Escalation:** The best way to handle a dangerous situation is to prevent it from escalating to begin with. Utilizing communication skills, maintaining a non-threatening posture, and understanding the psychology of aggression can all enable your team members to diffuse tension and potentially save lives.

Searching and Detainment

- **When can you search?** Most religious facilities stand on private property, granting them latitude in setting rules around searching belongings. However, these rules should be consistently applied, and searches should ideally be conducted outside the facility. If there is even narrow suspicion, entry should be denied. Seek guidance from your legal counsel.
- **When can you detain or physically restrain someone?** Tread cautiously here. While the "citizen's arrest" is romanticized in media, it can lead to charges like false imprisonment or even kidnapping in real life. Save for threats of imminent violence or harm, most security personnel lack the authority to detain individuals. Seek guidance from your legal counsel.

Use of Force Training

This paper will explore the topic of training in greater detail in future sections. For now, it is important to understand that use of force training is an essential component of training your armed volunteer security team. It teaches an understanding of when and how to engage a threat. Training with firearms marksmanship and judgment shooting simulators, scenario-based training with role players, and live exercises are all extremely valuable components of use of force training.

- **Certifications:** Seek out reputable organizations offering use of force training and certifications. This not only boosts skills but offers a layer of legal protection. Additionally, seek out a training facility that appropriately accommodates all your training needs.
- **Mental Health Training:** Armed volunteer security team members should also be adept at identifying when someone is having a mental health crisis, differentiating it from aggressive behavior and responding accordingly.

Collaborative Approach

- **Internal Collaboration:** Define roles clearly. While it is crucial to do so for armed team members, those not armed — such as ushers, greeters, and senior leaders — play a pivotal role in identifying potential threats before they require lethal force.
- **External Collaboration:** Engage with local law enforcement as you determine your use of force policies and protocols.
- **Emergencies:** Always call 911 immediately in crisis scenarios. The more you can leave the use of force to trained officers, the better and safer for everyone.

Navigating the use of force requires a combination of sound legal knowledge, robust training, and proactive collaboration. And remember: documentation matters. Keep robust records of training sessions, incidents, and protocols.

General Policy Considerations

Legal Documents

- It is advisable to prepare liability waivers and firearms policies and require all participants to sign them. While these can never fully absolve you of legal risk, they nonetheless provide an important layer of protection.
- Consider consulting with legal counsel when creating these documents to ensure they protect your organization's interests and comply with all state laws and regulations.

Conduct and Firearms Handling

- For those armed volunteer security team members permitted to carry, consider concealed carry as a mandatory policy, even with states that permit open carry. Open carry can disturb the sanctity of the space and cause undue concern among congregants, particularly when children are present. The only exception should be uniformed personnel.
- Firearms should be holstered securely at all times. There should be minimal, if any, firearm manipulation, e.g., display or public handling of firearms, on the premises. Lockers should be made available in a private, secure space in case an armed volunteer security team member needs to remove their firearm for any reason, such as to go to the restroom.

BEST PRACTICE CONSIDERATION

Consider implementing a strict concealed carry policy for all armed volunteer security team members of your security team to ensure the comfort of your congregation and protect the sanctity of your space. The only exception should be uniformed police.

Engagement with External Entities

- Work from the beginning and on a regular, ongoing basis to maintain a close relationship with local law enforcement. This includes obtaining their buy-in on your policies and procedures and seeking their recommendations for incident response and coordination with police and compliance with any local laws and regulations.
- Local police may ask that all armed volunteer security team members put on an identifying garment such as a brightly colored hat, armband, or sash to identify themselves to responding officers in the event of an emergency.

Stakeholder Involvement

- Make it your policy to keep your broader community informed of developments in your armed volunteer security program. This ensures transparency and can help in building trust. We will go into greater depth on how to engage with your community in the following section.

Continual Review

- Perform periodic evaluations of your policies and procedures. If financially feasible, consider hiring an outside firm to perform an audit.
- This ensures your policies remain relevant to evolving threats and best practices, and it ensures that you refine your processes based on what is working and what is not. This will be discussed in greater detail later in this paper.

Operation and Mobility

- Consider a combination of stationary and mobile personnel. Stationary guards can search bags and monitor entry points, while mobile guards patrol the interior/exterior areas and crowds, focused on access control and proactive engagement.
- Regular communication is essential, whether through earpieces, two-way radios, or another means.

Roles and Responsibilities in a Crisis

In the event of a security incident, ideally each member of your team would have one of the following six roles. These roles are the primary components of an armed volunteer security team, but teams with fewer members may need to take on more than one role per person.

- **Team Leader:** Provides overall leadership and management of the security team. They are responsible for coordinating the team's movements, making critical decisions during incidents, and ensuring clear communication among team members and with other stakeholders. The Team Leader also plays a vital role in post-incident debriefing and analysis, contributing to the continuous improvement of the team's preparedness and response capabilities.
- **Primary Responder (Contact):** Engages directly with the threat.
- **Primary Back-Up (Cover):** Provides close-in support and overwatch for the Primary Responder.
- **Communications:** Calls 911 and serves as the primary point of contact for law enforcement, including meeting them as they arrive on scene.
- **First Aid:** Administers medical assistance to any injured individuals.
- **Coordinator for Uninvolved:** Manages crowd movement and evacuation, lockdown, or lockout for all uninvolved congregants.

Protocols and Drills

- Establish clear and concise protocols for various situations: active shooter, bomb threat, suspicious individual, or other situations deemed necessary based on your threat assessment. These can be brief, simply describing roles, responsibilities, and key dos and don'ts.
- Training drills should include collaboration with Law Enforcement.
- Perform drills with the entire team present, in a basic-introductory training format and later on as refresher-sustainment training, in order to keep all team members' skills current. Conduct team training on all the blocks of training included under Training and Competencies, particularly:
    - **Contact-Cover Training**
    - **Greeter/Usher Training**
    - **Proactive External/Internal Patrol and Overwatch**
- Develop Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) — even tactical SOPs that include all the ways that the security team will conduct business — for situations such as a lost child, an emotionally disturbed individual, or an armed intruder. Training should consist of team drills on testing your SOPs and contingency training — reacting to situations that do not fit your SOPs.
- Security should be layered in depth and proactive in engagement of all visitors, known and unknown.

Signifiers for Armed Volunteer Security Team Members

Your local police may request or advise that you have clear, easily identifiable markers for armed volunteer security team members, especially during a crisis. These could include brightly colored hats, vests, or armbands. This ensures that responding officers can differentiate armed volunteer security team members from assailants. Considerations include:

- **Visibility:** Whether it is a hat, armband, vest, or sash, the identifier should be easily noticeable even in chaotic situations.
- **Coordination with Law Enforcement:** Remember that, for these signifiers to serve their purpose, responding officers must know to look for them. Ensure police are aware of your signifiers in advance of an incident. It is also good practice for whomever is tasked with calling police to notify the dispatcher of the identifying markers so that information can be relayed to responding officers.

BEST PRACTICE CONSIDERATION

Armed volunteer security team members must wear easily identifiable markers, such as brightly colored hats, during a crisis to ensure that responding officers can tell them apart from assailants. Coordinate these markers with police in advance.

Vetting Your Security Team

In pursuit of safety and security, it is critical to not only put the right policies in place but also choose the right individuals to carry out those policies. The process by which we identify, vet, and verify these individuals is central to the integrity and efficacy of the armed volunteer security team program. A thorough screening process ensures that the people trusted with the safety of the congregation are competent, mentally sound, and have the best of intentions.

The Components of a Thorough Screening Process

- **Legal Compliance:** At the outset, ensure candidates possess the required licenses and permits. This is non-negotiable and serves as a basic litmus test for the candidate's understanding of the law and level of responsibility.
- **Recruitment Strategy:** Consider the approach. Is it more beneficial to actively seek out specific individuals, perhaps those with a background in law enforcement or security, rather than casting a wide net and vetting volunteers? The former might prevent the uncomfortable situation of turning eager volunteers away.
- **Choose Your Administrators:** Decide who holds the responsibility of vetting participants. Is this an internal task handled by a committee, or would an external, specialized firm be more appropriate? Rabbis, lay leaders, and security committees might offer valuable insights, but it is essential that the final decision-makers be unbiased and thorough, and that they have a firm understanding of the requirements.
- **Set Clear Standards Upfront:** Have explicit criteria for what is acceptable, what is required, and what is a disqualification. This ensures the screening process is consistent, objective, and not perceived as arbitrary or discriminatory.
- **Conduct Thorough Background Checks:** It is critical to know whom you are dealing with, no matter how well established someone is in your community. Before conducting background checks, be sure to have the applicant sign a waiver concerning the investigations conducted. You should also specify who within the organization can access the results. A comprehensive background assessment should touch on:

- **A criminal background check**
- **Drug testing**
- **A mental health evaluation (considering HIPAA protections)**
- **Relevant experience, especially in security or conflict resolution**
- **Possibly a psychological assessment**

- **Situational Judgment and Bias Assessment:** This can reveal how a potential armed volunteer security member might react in real-world situations, helping to discern if their judgments align with the congregation's values.
- **Interviews:** After a person clears the initial screening phase, invite them in for interviews. Personal interaction can offer a depth of understanding no paper trail can provide. Through interviews, you can gauge a candidate's demeanor, commitment, and motivation.

BEST PRACTICE CONSIDERATION

Obtain a candidate's written consent to perform a comprehensive, multi-point background check. To avoid bias, evaluate them according to clear standards that are set in advance. Once a candidate clears this screening phase, invite them in for a final interview to ensure a good personality fit.

Legal Considerations

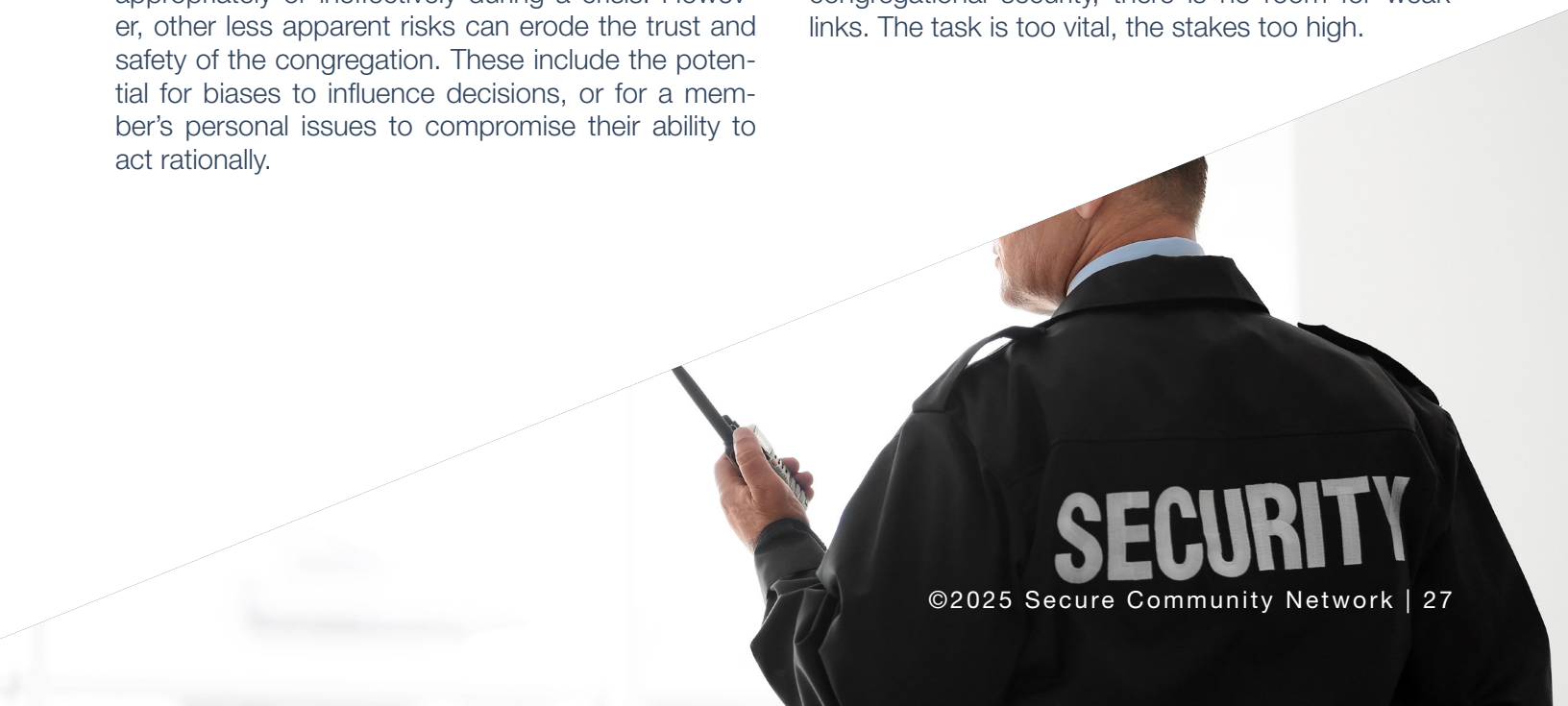
Ensuring a rigorous and thorough vetting process is not only about selecting the right people but also about mitigating potential legal ramifications. A lackluster process that results in an unfit individual joining the security team could lead to dire safety consequences, not to mention potential lawsuits and financial implications. This is why some congregations opt to involve professional firms in the screening process. Their expertise can offer both a higher level of screening and an added layer of legal protection.

In addition, it is essential to retain documents and records from the screening process so that you can prove the rigor of your process in case it is scrutinized following a safety incident.

Potential Pitfalls of an Incomplete Process

A hasty or incomplete screening process can have devastating consequences. The obvious risk is an armed volunteer security team member acting inappropriately or ineffectively during a crisis. However, other less apparent risks can erode the trust and safety of the congregation. These include the potential for biases to influence decisions, or for a member's personal issues to compromise their ability to act rationally.

In summary, constructing a comprehensive screening process is paramount. As the adage goes, "A chain is only as strong as its weakest link." In the realm of congregational security, there is no room for weak links. The task is too vital, the stakes too high.



Training and Competencies

Safety is no accident. It is the outcome of a deliberate and dedicated process, the foundation of which is effective training. By investing in a comprehensive training program, you are investing in the skills of a select few but also in the safety of the many.

> **"We don't rise to the level of our expectations; we fall to the level of our training."**
>
> **7th century BCE Greek warrior poet Archilochus and common saying in the United States Marine Corps**

Firearms Training Requirements

A good training program is comprehensive, adaptive, and rooted in best practices. It is about equipping members of the armed volunteer security team with the necessary skills and mindset to handle any situation that arises, from a minor health episode to an unruly individual or an active threat scenario.

As such, the training curriculum should be comprehensive. At a minimum, it should meet your state's licensing and permitting standards for armed security. On the higher end, you might consider striving for the rigor of the POST (Peace Officer Standards and Training) of your local police department. POST is a testing and evaluation system designed to assess the proficient application of critical skills with identifiable and measurable performance standards.

While it is not an exhaustive list, below are ideal blocks of training that will equip your armed volunteer security team with the skills and certifications to serve your organization well.

BASIC PROFICIENCY TRAINING

FIREARMS TRAINING

A good firearms training program will include lessons on basic safety, proper handling, storage, and maintenance in addition to accuracy and stress training.

- **Practical Firearms Skill Application**
- **Discretionary/Judgment Shooting**
- **Scenario-Based Role Player Training**
- **Firearms Retention Training**

Below is a list of training you should consider for your program:

- Empty hand control training (weaponless tactics)
- Use of restraints (handcuffing)
- Search tactics (people/buildings)
- Less lethal training (chemical spray, impact weapon, taser, etc.)
- Low light/no light training, limited visibility training with flashlights
- Basic field interview/interaction training (recognizing pre-attack signals)
- Contact-cover training/drills (unknown subject/armed subject)
- Proactive patrol training (recognizing suspicious persons/packages/circumstances)
- Basic legal training — laws of search and detention/use of force
- Active shooter training
- Usher-greeter training

- **Use of Force:** As we explored in a previous section, this training helps define those use of force parameters and offers guidance on making high-stakes, split-second decisions.
- **De-Escalation Training:** This equips individuals with skills to de-escalate potentially volatile situations through communication. Verbal Judo is one form of de-escalation training that is also available in book form.
- **Basic First Aid:** First Aid is an essential component of serving as a security officer, as team members are far more likely to encounter a routine medical emergency or an accident than an active threat situation.
- **Stop the Bleed:** This is a supplemental first aid training that teaches how to administer first aid in a bleeding emergency, such as after a gunshot wound or stabbing attack.
- **Implicit Bias Training:** Recognizing and confronting one's own biases is critical to fair and effective protection. This training can help prevent implicit biases from clouding judgment and leading to unnecessary escalation.
- **Law Enforcement Collaboration:** Hold a meeting or training session with your local police department in which officers share best practices for contacting them in a time of crisis, containing or responding to an incident before they arrive, and staying out of their way once they respond.

REMEMBER

Training is not a one-time event when setting up a team — it is an ongoing process that is useful for even the most experienced armed volunteer security team members. It is important to periodically assess the performance of your security team and refresh training on a regular basis. Regularly scheduled sustainment training of basic skills is essential to the effective performance of team members.

A Phased Approach

Comprehensive training is not inexpensive; it must be viewed as an investment. However, it is permissible to prioritize essential training first and then expand as resources allow. We consider essential training to include, at a bare minimum, firearms safety, shooting proficiency, and basic first aid.

Always remember that neglecting training is not an option. Doing so is not just a potential safety concern; it is a major legal and financial risk. Inadequate training can lead to accidents or misuse of force, opening up devastating lawsuits and financial liabilities for individuals as well as the organization. A well-documented and thorough training regimen can serve as a buffer against these threats. Training records and documentation are critical in assisting with future potential litigation and training history.

BEST PRACTICE CONSIDERATION

If a full suite of comprehensive training is not financially feasible, it is acceptable to prioritize essential training first and expand as resources allow. We consider essential training to include, at a bare minimum, firearms safety, shooting proficiency, and basic first aid.

Selecting Trainers

It is important to choose reputable, credentialed, and accredited training companies and programs. Using accredited training programs ensures that your team gets not only the best training but also proof of instructors' skills through certification. Identifying appropriate training facilities to properly accommodate all your training needs is also extremely important.

Properly researched and vetted private companies specializing in security training are ideal. While it may be tempting to allow individuals with backgrounds in law enforcement or the military to serve as informal trainers, this could make your congregation less safe while also raising the cost of your liability insurance or even making it difficult to attain coverage at all.

Equipment and Standardization

How much and what kind of equipment will your armed volunteer security team members need? There is a risk to being too conspicuous in their equipment and outfitting, which could make worshippers uncomfortable. At the same time, you want to ensure they are equipped to handle any situation. **Here are the standard categories of equipment your team will likely need:**

- **Firearms:** Opt for firearms that are reliable, have a reputation for safety, and are manageable for a range of individuals. Consider high-retention holsters as well as pepper spray and other less lethal options.
- **Communications Equipment:** Communications equipment is a big part of what makes a team a team. Whether by radio or cellphone, it is essential for your team to have some means of communicating and sharing information in real time.
- **Protective Equipment:** This could include ballistic vests (body armor), first aid/medical kits, flashlights, all-purpose tools, and high-visibility clothing for team members operating near roads or parking lots.
- **Surveillance Equipment:** Depending on the size and layout of your facility, surveillance cameras and other monitoring tools can be crucial.

When it comes to equipment, you must decide whether team members will bring their own or whether your organization should provide standardized equipment. There are pros and cons to both. Personal firearms might mean individuals are more familiar and comfortable with them, while standardization ensures consistency in performance and maintenance. Providing firearms to your team could also have legal implications for your organization and carry additional responsibilities, such as storage of the firearms and ammunition while not in use.

Ultimately, best practice includes providing, at a minimum, protective equipment and communications equipment for your team. Providing firearms has certain benefits if you have the budget and sign-off from your legal counsel. Whatever you decide, be sure that everyone is trained on the firearm they carry.

BEST PRACTICE CONSIDERATION

It is a best practice to provide your armed volunteer security team with, at a minimum, protective equipment and communications equipment. Obtain sign-off from your legal counsel before providing firearms. Whether you provide firearms or allow team members to bring their own, you should always require that everyone be trained on the firearm they ultimately carry.

Case Study: Magen Am's Community Team Member Program

Magen Am, a nonprofit Jewish security organization based in Los Angeles, operates one of the most developed armed volunteer security programs in the country. Its mission is simple but powerful: to protect communities from within. Of particular relevance is Magen Am's Community Team Member (CTM) program, which helps local synagogues and community organizations train and deploy armed volunteer security teams to protect their events — while operating under rigorous training standards, legal compliance, and institutional oversight.

Magen Am's CTM program is not simply groups of volunteers who happen to carry firearms. Rather, it is a formally structured, highly selective, and standards-driven program designed to create capable and coordinated protectors. Each CTM must be recommended by their rabbi, pass a comprehensive vetting process — including, in some cases, psychological screening — and obtain both a California Armed Guard Card and a Carry Concealed Weapon (CCW) license, the latter of which is notably difficult to secure under California law.

The upfront training commitment for CTMs is substantial, spanning more than 100 hours over six months. Volunteers undergo instruction in firearms safety and marksmanship (including FBI-standard qualification courses), de-escalation, use-of-force law, combatives, medical response, and scenario-based decision-making. They are also required to meet physical fitness benchmarks and, importantly, to maintain their skills through ongoing training. Volunteers are uniformed and insured, and they must use only approved firearms and gear. Many fund their own participation, though Magen Am supports the program through private donations and grants.

Perhaps most importantly, CTMs are deeply integrated into a broader community security architecture. They work in close coordination with Magen Am's professional Hired Team — largely composed of U.S. and Israeli military veterans — and with local law enforcement, particularly the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) and Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department (LASD). Magen Am's leadership has cultivated strong relationships with public safety agencies and earned commendations for its professionalism and community service.

Magen Am offers a powerful model for what an armed volunteer security program can be when structure and discipline are prioritized. The CTM program demonstrates that armed volunteer security can be done, not casually or as a fallback, but thoughtfully and in partnership with the broader public safety ecosystem. This is precisely the kind of program this white paper envisions and recommends.

“Magen Am has received commendations from law enforcement officials in Los Angeles for their professional performance, collaboration with law enforcement, and their commitment to the security of the Jewish community in Los Angeles.”

Commander Shannon Paulson, Assistant Commanding Officer, Los Angeles Police Department, Counter-Terrorism and Special Operations Bureau

WHAT SETS MAGEN AM’S PROGRAM APART?

- **Structure:** No informal carry is allowed. Every armed volunteer is part of an official team with designated leadership.
- **Training:** CTMs undergo more than 100 hours of intensive upfront training, which is regularly refreshed, covering legal, tactical, medical, and psychological preparedness.
- **Community Integration:** The program operates under the values and culture of the Jewish community it protects.
- **Law Enforcement Partnerships:** Magen Am has developed strong working relationships with LAPD, LASD, and Department of Homeland Security (DHS).
- **Mission Clarity:** CTMs serve only during designated duties (e.g., Shabbat, holidays, events), not as informal guardians.

Community Socialization and Engagement

Explaining the Firearms Policy to the Congregation

How does your community feel about an armed volunteer security team? Some might view it as a necessary measure given the state of security threats today, while others might feel deeply uncomfortable with the idea. Hosting town-hall-style meetings, distributing surveys, or organizing small focus groups can help in measuring and addressing such concerns.

Tackling this topic requires sensitivity and transparency.

- **Education:** Before discussing the program, educate the community about potential threats, historical incidents, and security requirements. Help them understand the "why" behind the program, in addition to the risks of uninformed decision-making.
- **Open Dialogue:** Host open forums where members can voice their concerns, ask questions, and provide feedback. This ensures a transparent and collective decision-making process.
- **Highlight the Bigger Picture:** Ensure that members understand that armed volunteer security is just one part of a comprehensive security plan and does not replace other fundamental safety measures.

BEST PRACTICE CONSIDERATION

To gauge community sentiment, consider hosting town-hall-style meetings, distributing surveys, or organizing small focus groups. Preface your communications with proper context about your thinking and your threat assessment.

Educating About Crisis Protocols

Once there is a policy in place, it is essential to communicate the role of an armed volunteer security team during emergencies. While detailed strategies should not be divulged for security reasons, offering a general overview can alleviate concerns.

Protecting Information While Ensuring Transparency

There is a thin line between keeping essential information confidential and maintaining transparency. Recommended strategies include:

- **Selective Sharing:** While key stakeholders, including law enforcement and certain community leaders, should be aware of detailed plans, avoid divulging all specifics to the broader congregation.
- **Feedback Mechanisms:** Encourage community members to provide feedback. Suggestion boxes or regular community engagement sessions can act as effective feedback channels.

Decision Making & Institutional Buy-In

Finally, the success of this program hinges on the support of key decision-makers within the institution. Recommended strategies include:

- **Engagement:** Hold regular briefings with leaders to keep them updated on security strategies.
- **Collaborative Decision Making:** Include leaders in the decision-making process, ensuring they feel ownership over the program.
- **Training:** Once leaders are onboard, integrate them into relevant training sessions so that they are not just passive endorsers but active participants.

Evaluation

Regular evaluation is pivotal to ensuring that a program is not only successful and maintaining compliance, but also continually evolving to adapt to new challenges. But how do you navigate the complexities of assessing such a sensitive program? How often do you recalibrate? And when you discover potential pitfalls, how do you address them?

Factors Can Change

The underlying facts that you evaluated when setting up your armed volunteer security team can — and almost certainly will — change with time.

- **Understanding Dynamic Threats:** The nature of threats will shift, from terrorism originating from foreign sources to domestic extremism and other forms. The methods used by assailants may also shift, from attacks with guns to knife or vehicle attacks, as attackers tend to be influenced by the actions of others.
- **Budgetary Constraints:** The budget you are able to dedicate to an armed volunteer security program may increase or decrease over time.
- **Laws and Liability Risks:** State laws around firearms and security change frequently, and the responsibility to stay informed of these changes falls on your organization. Consistently engaging with legal counsel is a must.

The Audit and Feedback Loop

How can you evaluate the effectiveness of your program? Consider implementing a reporting system to document incidents, identify trends, improve training, provide timely information to organizations when needed, and create documentation for record-keeping purposes.

- **After-Action Reports:** Make these standard for every incident, even minor health incidents or false alarms involving suspicious persons. These reports are essential for record keeping as well as evaluation, offering insights into what went right and where there is room for improvement.

- **Self-Assessments:** Periodic self-assessments serve as essential checkpoints. By taking the time to assess their own strengths, weaknesses, and areas for development, armed volunteer security teams can foster a culture of continuous improvement and adaptability.
- **External and Internal Audits:** Hiring an external auditor can be a valuable means of gaining expert insights into your program. For those who cannot afford this option, assembling an auditing committee of volunteer congregants — such as lawyers and security professionals — can still provide a fresh outsider perspective.
- **Engaging External Experts:** Consider inviting local police, FBI field offices, or prosecuting authorities in to observe training sessions or offer periodic assessments of your program. You can never have too much support from law enforcement.

BEST PRACTICE CONSIDERATION

After-Action Reports should be standard for every incident, even minor health incidents or false alarms involving suspicious persons. These reports are essential for records keeping as well as evaluation, offering insights into what went right and where there is room for improvement.

Recertification and Retraining

Training is not a one-time event. Regular recertification and retraining ensure that a program remains at its peak:

- **Setting a Recertification Baseline:** Be clear with your armed volunteer security team members on exactly how often they must be retrained and recertified. It is advisable to sustain core skills through semi-annual or annual mandatory training. This ensures skills remain sharp and up to date.
- **Keep in Touch with Trainers:** Training modules and methodologies are continuously updated to remain relevant and effective. Keeping an open line of communication with a reputable training company helps ensure that you are aware of updates that may be significant enough to warrant retraining.

> **“Training is perishable. No one ever really ‘graduates’ from training; they just get a break.”**
>
> **James Hartnett,** Director of Community Wide Security, Jewish Federation of Cleveland

Evaluating an armed volunteer security team is a holistic process that must take into account the evolving nature of threats, the ever-present risk of human error, and invaluable input from both the community and external experts. Adopting a proactive, rather than reactive, approach to program evaluation ensures not just the safety of the community, but also trust and confidence in the measures set in place.

Conclusion

The debate surrounding armed volunteer security teams is complex, in part, because it encompasses numerous issues — community values, political passions, budgetary constraints, the balance between sacred tradition and modern concerns, and the very essence of what our places of worship stand for. It is a troubling sign of the times that we need to consider these measures in the first place. Nonetheless, the issue exists in the minds of many congregants, and failing to set a policy could invite danger.

Allowing congregants to enter facilities while bearing a firearm is extremely complicated and requires thoughtful, thorough planning and an ongoing commitment to coordination, collaboration, and compliance as well as risk management principles. If you are going to allow it, you should only do so as part of a coordinated armed volunteer security team, the members of that team must be thoroughly and properly trained, you must carefully lay out policies and procedures to govern their actions, and you must understand the organizational risks and liabilities that come with that decision.

One thing is certain: Determining your policy necessitates a measured and careful approach. This should be about fostering a sense of security profound enough that every congregant can engage in worship without fear. Whether allowing firearms helps or hurts in pursuit of that goal is a question that every community must answer for itself.

The efforts of the group of professionals who worked on this important effort, informed by other faiths as well as members and leaders of the community, suggest there are many complexities and challenges of an armed volunteer security team program. In some places and under the right circumstances, the benefits will outweigh the potential disadvantages. In other places and based on their circumstances, the disadvantages will outweigh the potential benefits.

All Jewish communities are unique, both in composition and in the challenges they face. Some might find that, given their specific circumstances, having trained, responsible individuals who are armed is a useful last line of defense against external threats.

Accomplishing this with a program that is safe, legal, and responsible, requires significant commitment and resources. As this paper demonstrates, the long list of considerations necessary to establish a compliant and effective program is burdensome by its very nature. If implemented correctly,

an armed volunteer security team can enhance the safety of a congregation. Nonetheless, it is important to remember that there are means and measures for congregations to remain safe without armed security.

An organization's or community's decision to arm certain congregants should always be anchored in dialogue, transparency, and mutual respect. Open conversations with all stakeholders, including community members and local law enforcement, help ensure as many people as possible are aligned on the plan. Such collaborative efforts, combined with detailed procedural blueprints, can reduce potential pitfalls and enhance the effectiveness of the program.

The pages of history remind us that our community has faced numerous challenges over the centuries yet has always emerged resilient by drawing strength from our faith, our traditions, and our collective spirit. As we navigate the complex threats of the present moment, let us remember that those threats pale in comparison to the enduring power and resiliency of our faith.

Appendix A

Sample 'No Firearms' Policy

"[Named organization] expressly prohibits the possession, custody, carry, and use or control of any firearms, weapons, or explosives on its property. This prohibition extends to congregants, guests, visitors, contractors, and anyone other than active law enforcement and authorized contracted security personnel."

Appendix B

Department of Justice Policy on Use of Force

1-16.100 - BACKGROUND

It is the policy of the Department of Justice to value and preserve human life. Officers may use only the force that is objectively reasonable to effectively gain control of an incident, while protecting the safety of the officer and others, in keeping with the standards set forth in *Graham v. Connor*, 490 U.S. 386 (1989). Officers may use force only when no reasonably effective, safe, and feasible alternative appears to exist and may use only the level of force that a reasonable officer on the scene would use under the same or similar circumstances.

As the Supreme Court stated in Graham: The decision to use force "requires careful attention to the facts and circumstances of each particular case, including the severity of the crime at issue, whether the suspect poses an immediate threat to the safety of the officer or others, and whether [the suspect] is actively resisting arrest or attempting to evade arrest by flight." *Id* at 396. "The calculus of reasonableness must embody allowance for the fact that police officers are often forced to make split-second judgments — in circumstances that are tense, uncertain, and rapidly evolving — about the amount of force that is necessary in a particular situation." *Id* at 396-97. In addition, "[t]he 'reasonableness' of a particular use of force must be judged from the perspective of a reasonable officer on the scene, rather than with the 20/20 vision of hindsight." *Id* at 397. "[T]he question is whether the officers' actions are 'objectively reasonable' in light of the facts and circumstances confronting them." *Id.* This Department-wide policy emphasizes core principles and training standards for the DOJ law enforcement component agencies, which have updated their individual use of force training programs regularly.

1-16.200 - USE OF DEADLY FORCE AND PROHIBITED RESTRAINT TECHNIQUES

A. Deadly Force

Law enforcement and correctional officers of the Department of Justice may use deadly force only when necessary, that is, when the officer has a reasonable belief that the subject of such force poses an imminent danger of death or serious physical injury to the officer or to another person.

1. Deadly force may not be used solely to prevent the escape of a fleeing suspect.
2. Firearms may not be discharged solely to disable moving vehicles. Specifically, firearms may not be discharged at a moving vehicle unless: (1) a person in the vehicle is threatening the officer or another person with deadly force by means other than the vehicle; or (2) the vehicle is operated in a manner that threatens to cause death or serious physical injury to the officer or others, and no other objectively reasonable means of defense appear to exist, which includes moving out of the path of the vehicle. Firearms may not be discharged from a moving vehicle except in exigent circumstances. In these situations, an officer must have an articulable reason for this use of deadly force.
3. If feasible and if to do so would not increase the danger to the officer or others, a verbal warning to submit to the authority of the officer shall be given prior to the use of deadly force.
4. Warning shots are not permitted outside of the prison context.
5. Officers will be trained in alternative methods and tactics for handling resisting subjects, which must be used when the use of deadly force is not authorized by this policy.
6. Deadly force should not be used against persons whose actions are a threat solely to themselves or property unless an individual poses an imminent danger of death or serious physical injury to the officer or others in close proximity.

B. Prohibited Restraint Techniques When Subduing a Suspect

1. For the purposes of this subsection:

   a. A "chokehold" is a physical restraint technique that applies pressure to the throat or windpipe and restricts an individual's ability to breathe.

   b. A "carotid restraint" is a physical restraint

technique that restricts blood flow to the brain causing temporary unconsciousness.

2. Law enforcement and correctional officers of the Department of Justice [Footnote 1] are prohibited from using a chokehold or a carotid restraint unless the standard of necessity for use of deadly force is satisfied.

Department law enforcement components must maintain internal policies to reflect this prohibition.

[Footnote 1] For the purposes of this subsection, "law enforcement and correctional officers of the Department of Justice" includes any task force officer when that individual is acting under the authority of a Department law enforcement agency, including during federal task force operations.

1-16.300 - DE-ESCALATION

II. Officers will be trained in de-escalation tactics and techniques designed to gain voluntary compliance from a subject before using force, and such tactics and techniques should be employed if objectively feasible and they would not increase the danger to the officer or others. When feasible, reducing the need for force allows officers to secure their own safety as well as the safety of the public.

1-16.400 - AFFIRMATIVE DUTY TO INTERVENE

III. Officers will be trained in, and must recognize and act upon, the affirmative duty to intervene to prevent or stop, as appropriate, any officer from engaging in excessive force or any other use of force that violates the Constitution, other federal laws, or Department policies on the reasonable use of force.

1-16.500 - AFFIRMATIVE DUTY TO RENDER MEDICAL AID

IV. Officers will be trained in, and must recognize and act upon, the affirmative duty to request and/or render medical aid, as appropriate, where needed.

1-16.600 - TRAINING

V. All officers shall receive training, at least annually, on the Department's use of force policy and related legal updates.

VI. In addition, training shall be provided on a regular and periodic basis and designed to:

- **a.** Provide techniques for the use of and reinforce the importance of de-escalation;
- **b.** Simulate actual shooting situations and conditions; and
- **c.** Reinforce the appropriate exercise of discretion and judgment in using less-than-lethal and deadly force in accordance with this policy.

VII. All use-of-force training shall be documented.

1-16.700 - APPLICATION OF THE POLICY

VIII. This policy shall be made available to the public, including being posted on the Department's website.

IX. This policy is not intended to, and does not, create any right or benefit, substantive or procedural, enforceable at law or equity, against the United States, its departments, agencies, or other entities, its officer or employees, or any other person.

Appendix C

Magen Am Policy Sections 3 and 4

SECTION 3: USE OF FORCE

The Company's primary responsibility is to observe and report. It is the policy of the Company that all security officers whether or not they are community team members conduct their duties with the intent to avoid physical confrontations with others, however it is recognized that in the performance of the security officer's duties there may arise situations where use of force is necessary.

3.1. Use of Force Policy

The Company has established this Use of Force Policy and it is applicable to all security officer personnel. It is the Company policy that community team members shall only use force where it is reasonably necessary to: (1) protect oneself or others from imminent bodily injury or death; or (2) overcome resistance or non-compliance to a lawful directive or lawful arrest for a felony or for a misdemeanor committed in your presence. The degree of force used shall be only that amount of force reasonably necessary to counter the threat, and may be employed for as long as the threat persists. The use of force is dictated by the threat from the suspect, and should be proportionate to that threat, which can change in any dynamic situation.

The use of force is appropriate where the security officer believes the action is in defense of another, including the officer, from a potential or actual physically violent situation and to effectively bring the situation under control pending a response from local law enforcement agencies. If faced with a clear and immediate threat of bodily harm, security personnel should always consider retreating if reasonable to do so at the time. Deadly force may never be used for the protection of property or information. "Deadly Force" is any use of force that is likely to cause death or serious bodily injury. Deadly force must only be used to defend life or imminent threat of great bodily injury. Community team members who improperly use or apply excessive force may be held liable for their actions in a court of law, both criminally and civilly. The Company may also disallow the community team member from further volunteering with the Company.

The use of excessive force can result in both criminal and civil liability. It may also result in discipline, up to and including termination.

SECTION 4: WEAPONS & SECURITY EQUIPMENT

Under no circumstances are weapons of any kind to be carried on duty unless expressly authorized by the Company and the Officer is appropriately licensed to carry said weapons. This includes but is not limited to: Firearms, impact weapons, stun devices, chemical agents, knives, handcuffs, etc. Violation of any portion of this Section ("Weapons & Security Equipment") may result in discipline, up to and including termination.

Security Officers are only allowed to carry Company approved weapons and equipment on duty. All Security Officers are required to demonstrate proficiency to a Company approved instructor in the weapons they are licensed to carry prior to carriage of said weapons on duty. In order to carry approved weapons and security equipment while on duty, community team members must possess all appropriate licenses and have proof of those licenses on their person at all times when on duty.

4.1. Firearms

Exposed Firearms. Security Officers are only permitted to carry exposed firearms on duty if they possess all of the following:

1. Express authorization from the Company;
2. They have completed a BSIS approved Firearms Training Course where they have successfully demonstrated their proficiency, and have produced a certificate of proficiency from a Firearms Training Instructor licensed by the BSIS; and
3. They have in their possession (while carrying said Firearm) a valid and current BSIS issued Firearms Permit.

Concealed Weapons. Security Officers are only permitted to carry concealed firearms on duty if they possess all of the following:

1. They have the express authorization from the Company to carry a concealed weapon;
2. They have satisfied all of the above requirements to carry an exposed firearm; and
3. They have in their possession at all times while carrying a concealed firearm a valid permit issued by an appropriate law enforcement official authorizing the community team member to carry a concealed weapon (i.e., permit to carry a concealed weapon, or “CCW” permit).

NO FIREARMS ARE PERMITTED TO BE CARRIED ON DUTY UNLESS PRIOR EXPRESS AUTHORIZATION IS PROVIDED BY THE CEO. All Company officers who are permitted to carry a firearm must adhere to all federal, state, and local laws, as well as all Company policies, rules and regulations.

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