

Protecting Places of Worship from an Active Armed Offender

Practical Information for Tasmanian Faith Communities





Introduction for faith community leaders

While places of worship traditionally are known for their safety and peace, they are not immune to violence. The world has recently witnessed a number of senseless and shocking attacks against places of worship. Although Australia is a safe country and such violence is exceedingly rare (perhaps unheard of in Tasmania), if it occurs many fatalities and/or traumatised communities can result.

Rarity does not reduce consequence so, as a religious leader, be encouraged to help your faith community be prepared and, if necessary, lead your community through appropriate response and healthy recovery processes. Even raising this topic might create stress and concern for some in your congregation/group, so sensitivity and wisdom is needed to address this matter, and to implement relevant policies and practices.

The Australian Government offers useful and pertinent advice and resources through their Security and Community portal at:

<https://www.nationalsecurity.gov.au/Securityandyourcommunity>

Resources available on this site include details of Australia's Strategy for Protecting Crowded Places from Terrorism (including very useful self assessment and security audit tools), the National Terrorism Threat Advisory System and the National Security Hotline.

In the unlikely event that your place of worship is attacked, the Government provides clear advice in their 'In the event of an attack, what you do matters' campaign. This advice is to:

ESCAPE. move quickly and quietly away from danger, but only if it is safe to do so

HIDE. stay out of sight and silence your mobile phone

TELL. call the police by dialing Triple Zero (000) when it is safe

The 'take home' message for you and the members of your faith community is to remember the words **ESCAPE, HIDE, TELL.**





Prevention and preparedness

Preventing, or at least mitigating, active armed offender events is complex — and not always possible. Every situation is different; the number of attackers and the weapon/s used will vary. However, there are steps that a local faith community can take to decrease the likelihood, severity and consequences of such a situation.

The best course of action to protect and prepare your congregation/group is to develop and practise an **Emergency Action Plan (EAP)**; see the 'Emergency Action Plan' on the following page for more information.

In addition to the implementation of an EAP, the following steps/actions can help prevent or mitigate an active armed offender event:

- get to know your local community including other religious groups
- cultivate a welcoming environment and a respectful attitude in your place of worship and among the surrounding community
- stay up-to-date with happenings in your community and among its various subcultures in order to better understand your place of worship's vulnerabilities
- develop and maintain open and mutually supportive relationships with the local police and other emergency services
- work with local police to identify and monitor hate crime trends or groups who may pose a threat to you, your congregation/group or the community.

Please note that this type of crisis can occur at any time, e.g., during worship, congregational events or regular business hours, so plans must account for your faith community's various scenarios.

The following general prevention-related activities can be employed to help reduce the severity or impact of an emergency event: gathering and analysing intelligence, developing strategies to reduce the impact on life/property, and identifying or eliminating vulnerabilities at potential target sites.

For most types of hostile attacks, prevention activities should aim to:

- deter a would-be attacker – by providing physical and electronic security measures, coupled with good management practices
- detect an intrusion – by providing alarm and visual detection/recording systems
- delay or limit the intrusion for a sufficient period to allow a response force to attend – by putting in place measures that will potentially limit the movement of the offender.

For active armed offender attacks, prevention-related activities specifically aimed at mitigating or reducing the severity of the incident should also be considered. The main focus of those activities should be on restricting the movement of the offender/s while reducing their access to further victims. How to best achieve this will depend on many variables, such as the physical design and security features of the venue, the movement of the offender and the opportunities for escape/shelter in place.

Not all venues and events will share the same risk profile or have similar vulnerabilities, so the principle of 'proportionality' should generally be applied to any prevention-related activities. This means that protective security measures not only need to be proportionate to the level of assessed risk, but should also try to strike a balance between the threat to public safety and the protection of civil liberties. However, when measuring proportionality it should be recognised that prevention and preparedness activities related to a specific threat may also provide broader crime prevention and public safety benefits.



Emergency Action Plan

To best prepare yourself and your staff (including volunteers) for an active armed offender situation, create an Emergency Action Plan (EAP), and conduct training exercises to rehearse and review your plan. Together, this EAP and training exercises will prepare your staff to effectively respond, and help minimise injury and loss of life.



Components of an Emergency Action Plan

Your EAP must be specific to your place of worship, reflecting its particular facilities and staff, so create the plan with input from stakeholders, depending on the size and scope of your faith community. Stakeholders to consider include the following: human resources personnel, training manager, health and safety representative, facility owners and operators, your property manager, Board members, and police and/or other emergency responders.



An effective EAP includes

- a preferred and readily accessible method for reporting emergencies
- an evacuation policy and procedure
- emergency escape procedures and route assignments (i.e., floor plans, safe areas)
- contact information for, and responsibilities of, individuals/organisations/services to be contacted
- information concerning local area hospitals (i.e., name, telephone number, and distance from your location)
- an emergency notification system to alert various parties of an emergency including: individuals at remote locations within the premises, police, and local hospitals.



Components of training exercises

The most effective way to train your staff to respond to an active armed offender situation is to conduct mock exercises. In some cases, local police may be available to assist with the design of your training exercises.

Your Staff should be trained in:

- recognising the sound of gunshots
- reacting quickly when gunshots are heard and/or when a shooting is witnessed
- evacuating the area
- hiding out
- calling the police on 000
- reacting appropriately when police or other support arrives
- adopting a survival mindset during times of crisis.



Additional ways to prepare

- ensure that your facility has at least two evacuation routes
- post signs and maps of evacuation routes in conspicuous locations throughout your facility
- include police and/or other first responders during training exercises
- encourage/invite law enforcement, emergency responders, Special Operations Group, K-9 teams, and bomb squads to train for an active armed offender scenario at your facilities or events.



Emergency actions during an active armed offender incident

When an active armed offender is near or inside your place of worship/office, you and your staff should lead your congregation and/or others in the space at the time in taking the following steps to minimise the loss of life.

When in the vicinity of an active armed offender:

ESCAPE.

Your priority action should be to remove yourself and others from close proximity to the offender/s, or areas that they might reasonably access. The following actions may influence the decisions you make in safely assessing your available options:

Under immediate attack – Take cover initially, but attempt to leave the area as soon as it is safe to do so. Note the following:

- take mobile phone but leave most belongings behind
- do not congregate in open areas or wait at evacuation points
- provide guidance to people who might be unfamiliar with the area
- make good use of available cover and concealment opportunities
- consider (only as a last resort) options for arming yourself with improvised weapons to defend yourself in the event that you are located by the offender.

Under nearby attack – Leave the area immediately and move quickly from where the attack is located, but only if it is safe to do so.

Seek out the following cover from gunfire

- brickwork or concrete walls
- vehicles (engine block area)
- large trees and fixed objects
- earth banks/hills/mounds.

In addition, the following objects can provide concealment from view

- building walls and partitions (internal and external)
- vehicles
- fences and other large structures
- blinds/curtains.

HIDE.

If you don't believe you can safely evacuate, you may need to consider sheltering in place. Constantly re-assess the situation and your options based on the best available information. Consider the following:

- avoid congregating in open areas, such as corridors and foyers

- consider locking or barricading yourself and others in a room or secure area
- secure your immediate environment and other vulnerable areas
- move away from the door, remain quiet and stay there until told otherwise by appropriate authorities, or you need to move for safety reasons
- silence mobile phones and other devices that may identify your presence
- try to contact police (000) or others to advise of your location and situation
- assess and re-assess better options for sheltering in place either within your current location or at an alternative location
- choose a location that may enable access to a more secure area
- consider (only as a last resort) options for arming yourself with improvised weapons to defend yourself in the event that you are located by the offender.

TELL.

The more information you can pass on to the police or other supports the better, but never at the risk of your or others' safety.

If it is safe to do so, think about obtaining the following information:

- exact location of the incident
- description of the offender/s and whether they are moving in any particular direction
- details of any weapons being used
- number of people in the area and any that have been injured
- the motive or intent of the offender/s (if known or apparent).

Provide this information immediately to the police via 000 if this can be achieved safely. You may be asked to remain on the line and provide further information that the operator requests or if the situation changes.

Consider providing information and advice to others who may be in your area and unsure of the current location of the threat and/or what they should do. Whether you are able to safely do this, and the communication methods available to you, will be determined by the circumstances and your own assessment of the situation.

Police response

In an Active Armed Offender scenario a police officer's priority is to protect lives. One of their priority actions to achieve this will be to locate the offender and effectively manage that threat as quickly as possible, which could mean initially moving past people who need help.

As more police resources become involved they will attempt to quickly provide support and guidance to persons affected by the incident.

At some stage they will conduct a 'clearance' search of the location to ensure that all persons involved or impacted by the incident are located, and to make the scene safe.

Please remember:

- upon arriving at the scene, police officers may initially be unable to distinguish you from the offender/s
- police officers will be armed and could point guns in your direction
- avoid quick movements or shouting, and keep your hands in view

- they may initially move past you in search of the offender/s
- be aware that police may enter your location at some stage to secure the building and locate people who have hidden from the threat
- promptly follow any instructions given by emergency responders.

Type of attack

Based on recent experiences elsewhere, attacks involving weapons such as guns and knives are most common, and the **ESCAPE HIDE TELL** advice applies. However, you may find yourself in an attack involving an improvised explosive device (IED), chemical weapons or a vehicle; in these circumstances, you may need to consider different actions. For further information please refer to advice provided at:

<https://www.nationalsecurity.gov.au/Securityandyourcommunity/Pages/escape-hide-tell.aspx>



Congregational/group recovery

Was this a hate crime?

An immediate reaction to this type of situation might be to claim that it was a hate crime against your specific religious group. However, police will want to see evidence of such a motivation. Arguing heatedly with police over the motivation of the active armed offender will neither help the congregation heal nor contribute to police's ability to properly investigate the crime. While the alternative may be challenging, it is best to look objectively at the information and work with law enforcement as they investigate the motivation behind the incident.

Disaster backlash

It is possible that after an active armed offender situation, members of your congregation may attempt some type of backlash against other people associated with the offender. This is especially true if the alleged offender was of a different race, religion, or socioeconomic class from that of members of your group. This backlash may manifest itself in discrimination or crimes, and can be directed at a certain race, religion, or even the offender's family. As a religious leader, promoting tolerance, peace, unity, and understanding will help the community recover in a healthy manner.



Further information and resources

Prevention and preparedness

Tasmania Police (non-emergencies): **13 14 44**

Special Response and Counter-Terrorism (Tasmania Police): **03 6173 2500**

Security and your Community (Australian Government): <https://www.nationalsecurity.gov.au/Securityandyourcommunity/Pages/default.aspx>

Australia's Strategy for Protecting Crowded Places from Terrorism (Australian Government): <https://www.nationalsecurity.gov.au/Securityandyourcommunity/Pages/australias-strategy-for-protecting-crowded-places-from-terrorism.aspx>

Lessons learned

While it may be challenging to address the impact of an active armed offender incident objectively and strategically, given the emotional toll of such a crisis, this step is necessary to facilitate effective planning for future emergencies. It is important to analyse the recent active armed offender situation and create an after-action report, which will be useful for:

- serving as documentation for response or recovery activities
- identifying successes and failures that occurred during the incident
- working with police to provide an analysis of the effectiveness of your existing EAP
- describing and defining a plan for making improvements to your EAP
- editing your plan, and improving your security infrastructure and training.

Active Armed Offender Guidelines for Crowded Places (Australian Government, 2017):

<https://www.nationalsecurity.gov.au/Media-and-publications/Publications/Documents/active-armed-offender-guidelines-crowded-places.pdf>

Response and recovery

Tasmania Police: **000**

Lifeline: **13 11 14**

FindHelpTas: <https://www.findhelptas.org.au/>

TasALERT: **03 6232 7551** <http://alert.tas.gov.au/>

Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement: **1800 642 066** <https://www.grief.org.au/>

SANE Australia: **1800 187 263** www.sane.org



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