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Building Safer Communities: Security Awareness for Vulnerable Spaces

Bulletin # 2025-010

Dear Baltimore County SHIELD Members,

On a quiet Sunday morning this past September, worshippers in Michigan gathered for service as they always had. Without warning, a car slammed into the church, followed by arson and gunfire. Several lives were lost before first responders could arrive.

Only days later and across the Atlantic, worshippers at a synagogue in Manchester, England left Yom Kippur services unaware that danger was waiting just outside. A vehicle plowed into congregants, and a knife attack followed, leaving the community shaken and grieving.

Different faiths, different continents, but the lesson is the same: houses of worship remain soft targets for those who seek to harm.

The threat does not end at sacred spaces. Across the United States, students have endured waves of swatting hoaxes that turned classrooms into crime scenes of fear. Hospitals continue to struggle with the fallout from ransomware attacks that not only steal data but also disrupt patient care. And just this year, federal courts sentenced extremists who plotted to cripple power substations, a stark reminder that critical infrastructure remains in the crosshairs.

These stories share a single truth: security is not the job of law enforcement alone. It is a shared responsibility. Whether in a church, a synagogue, a mosque, a classroom, or a hospital ward, safety depends on people noticing, acting, and working together. We will explore five practical approaches that help strengthen community safety: Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED), the Power of Hello, situational awareness, the "If You See Something, Say Something®" campaign, and a broader awareness of terrorism. Together, these strategies offer simple but powerful ways to build stronger, more resilient communities.



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Safety: What CPTED Teaches Us

Stories like these remind us that prevention can begin before anyone steps inside a building. Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design, or CPTED, is the idea that physical spaces can be shaped to discourage crime and support safety. In practice, this means keeping entrances visible and well-lit, trimming landscaping that could conceal someone near a doorway, and guiding visitors toward a single point of entry where they can be greeted. For schools, it may mean secured vestibules that prevent unrestricted access to hallways. For critical infrastructure, fencing, barriers, and lighting around perimeters communicate both control and vigilance.

Good design alone cannot stop every threat, but it changes the environment in ways that make harmful acts harder to attempt and easier to detect.

A Greeting that Protects: The Power of Hello

In hospitals and schools, reception desks are often the first human contact. In churches and synagogues, ushers and greeters serve that role. These positions may seem informal, but they can be critical. CISA's "Power of Hello" approach shows how a simple greeting can deter or reveal suspicious intent. By making eye contact and offering a friendly hello, staff both welcome visitors and signal that behavior is being noticed. If a person responds evasively, asks probing questions, or acts oddly, the greeter now has context to escalate concern to supervisors or security.

This method, observe, greet, navigate, and obtain help has already been used successfully to interrupt individuals testing security at hospitals and campuses. It shows that security begins not with confrontation, but with connection.

The Value of Awareness: Learning from a Hoax

In September, dozens of schools and universities across the United States were thrown into chaos by swatting calls. Each false report triggered lockdowns, emergency responses, and fear among students and parents. Although no attacker was physically present, the hoaxes revealed how vulnerable communities can be when unprepared for sudden disruption.

Situational awareness is not paranoia, it is noticing what belongs and what does not. For a school administrator, that may mean paying attention to who enters hallways. For a hospital nurse, it might be noticing someone lingering near secure doors. In worship settings, it can be as simple as observing



vehicles parked where they shouldn't be. Teaching staff and community members to pause, notice, and act on these instincts is one of the most powerful preventative tools available.

Speaking Up: The Importance of Reporting

Awareness matters most when it is followed by action. The “If You See Something, Say Something®” campaign has become a national call to empower individuals to speak up when something feels wrong. But awareness can also mean doing something in the moment whether that is alerting a supervisor, checking on a colleague, or creating distance until help arrives. Together, “see something, say something” and “see something, do something” create a fuller picture: noticing, reporting, and responsibly acting when necessary.

Many people hesitate to act or report because they fear being wrong, embarrassing themselves, or offending someone. Others worry about “overreacting” or assume someone else will step in. Unfortunately, that hesitation can allow concerning behaviors to go unaddressed until it is too late.

The truth is that acting does not always mean dramatic intervention. It can be as simple as greeting someone who seems out of place, alerting security to check a door that was left propped open, or calling a colleague to stand with you if a situation feels uncomfortable. Saying something ensures the right people are aware, and doing something safely and proportionally can interrupt a potential threat before it grows.

When we encourage both speaking up and taking safe, practical steps in the moment, we reduce risk. Communities become stronger when individuals understand that vigilance is not about fear, but about care for one another.

Terrorism Awareness: Expanding the Picture

Not all terrorism looks like the large-scale plots we imagine. It can be a lone individual with a car, a false 911 call designed to cause panic, or a cyberattack that shuts down a hospital system. Earlier this year, a drone-bombing plot against the power grid in Tennessee resulted in a guilty plea, and in Baltimore a man was sentenced for conspiring to damage substations. Both cases show how extremists still target energy systems as a way to disrupt society.

Understanding these patterns is essential. Violence today often relies on accessible, low-tech means such as vehicles, knives, arson, and hoaxes that require little preparation. Cyber threats add another



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layer, turning technical failures into emergencies. Training staff and volunteers to recognize these diverse risks allows organizations to prepare realistic plans and respond with confidence.

Shared Responsibility

A greeter offering a hello, a nurse who questions a stranger's behavior, a student who reports a suspicious message, or a technician who replaces a broken light all contribute to safety. Each action may seem small, but together they create layers of protection that make our communities more resilient.

Baltimore County SHIELD continues to support partners in houses of worship, healthcare, education, and infrastructure. Our team offers walk-throughs, formal vulnerability assessments, emergency action plan reviews, and tabletop exercises tailored to these sectors. By combining smart design, human interaction, awareness, and a willingness to report, we can strengthen the places where we live, work, play, and worship ensuring they remain safe havens for the people who depend on them.



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