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The Church Safety Officer

Whether you are a new Safety Officer or have held the position for a number of years, the following information will help you understand your responsibilities.

A Team Effort

You are not alone. Protecting people and property requires a team effort on the part of church pastors, elders and deacons; Sabbath School and activity leaders; the safety committee; the church board; and ultimately, church workers, volunteers and members. Good communication and interaction between you and these individuals is crucial.

Self-Inspections

A major way to prevent losses is to identify and correct hazardous conditions before accidents happen. At least once a year, with assistance from a member or members of the safety committee perform a walk through of the church. Because hazards can rapidly spring up, more frequent surveys are recommended, and all staff, elders, deacons and volunteers should constantly be vigilant and report or correct them when observed. The Church Self-Inspection Form, also on the website, will help in the identification of key issues.

Slips, Trips and Falls

Slips, trips and falls generally remain a primary cause of church accidents. They can be caused by broken steps, potholes in parking areas, cracked sidewalks, torn and wrinkled carpet, gravel, twigs or other debris on walkways, or wet floors from inclement weather, or spills, to name a few. Promptly correct these conditions.

Security

Security is more than cameras and some alarms on doors and windows. A security program designed to protect people and property includes increased visibility through the trimming of vegetation, good lighting

(inside and out), and other elements. Everyone must be observant and responsive to suspicious activity (someone lurking in shadows or hallways, unattended packages, etc.). In some locations it may also mean the visible presence of a trained security team.

Emergency Plans and Preparedness

For most churches, it's business as usual week after week, but that can change in an instant, particularly in an area prone to earthquakes, hurricanes or other natural disasters. In some locations, there may also be a potential for riots, while a random act of violence can occur anywhere. Determine the primary exposures to your church and make sure your church has an emergency plan and is prepared to react appropriately to disasters as they arise. (See "Church Emergency Response and Business Continuity Planning" and "AEDs" on the website.)

Various codes also require that doors remain unlocked and that doorways, aisles, foyers and steps be kept clear of anything (yes even chairs) to ensure a clear means of egress in the event of an emergency.

Activities

List and evaluate church activities. Some are low risk and high gain, while others are high risk with little to gain and a potential for injured youth, staff or volunteers. Establish a process where each activity is properly analyzed before approval. Ensure that the process includes provisions for transportation, safety equipment, medical release forms for youth under 18 and parent/guardian permission slips for each activity. Help develop written guidelines and rules and be prepared to recommend that some activities be prohibited. Maintain a list of those approved and those that are prohibited. Church board approval will be required for some.

Transportation

So much can go wrong when transportation needs are not carefully thought out. A poorly maintained vehicle or a bad driver could result in disaster. Selecting too small of a vehicle for the need can lead to "overloading," sloppy vehicle handling and loss of control. Know how many people need to be transported, how much gear needs to be hauled and plan accordingly. Leasing a bus and driver from a reputable agency is an option to consider, as opposed to a lot of personal vehicles with volunteers whose vehicles or driving habits may be unsafe.

Accidents

When incidents or accidents occur at the church, during an activity, or in transit, the Church Safety Officer in conjunction with the safety committee will conduct an investigation. Investigations help to identify the causes and what actions might help prevent similar accidents from occurring again. See the Foresight, "Accident Investigation," for additional information on this topic.

An Important Role

You have a big responsibility and an excellent opportunity to promote safety throughout the church.

IT IS AN IMPORTANT ROLE, AND YOUR EFFORTS ARE APPRECIATED.

