

2017 Arson Awareness Week — Arson Prevention Activities for Houses of Worship

Houses of worship are particularly vulnerable to fire damage because they're often in rural areas and unoccupied for long periods of time.

Just as it is impossible to prevent all crime, so is the case with arson. Therefore, arson prevention at houses of worship is all about creating an environment where you reduce the chances that your worship center is targeted, and in the event an arson takes place, the potential for damage and injury is minimized. The umbrella of arson prevention strategies include: fire prevention, fire safety, and crime prevention. You can involve your congregation in activities focusing on these distinct concerns.

Schedule a weekend day to offer any or all of the following activities, including: Congregation Fire Safety Day, House of Worship Fire Safety Day, Crime Prevention Day, and/or Clean-Up Day.

Congregation Fire Safety Day

Engage your local fire department. Fire departments routinely provide fire safety training to schools, senior centers and other high-risk audiences. Fire departments would be pleased to provide similar training to a house of worship.

Depending on the local fire codes, the fire department personnel will address the presence, location and number of smoke alarms in the building. They will encourage you to test the smoke alarms every month, along with checking the batteries. The fire department will encourage the use of 10-year batteries which can't be removed from your smoke and carbon monoxide alarms.

Houses of worship are comprised of more than just a single devotion area. There are often places for youth education, small meetings and study, a kitchen and common area for meals, along with a library and other rooms. There should be two ways out of every room, no matter how big or small. A specific fire escape plan needs to be developed and visibly posted. If a fire occurs, the congregation should know to get out, stay out and call for help — never go back inside for anything or anyone.

If your building doesn't have an automatic fire sprinkler system, think about installing one. The combination of working smoke alarms and fire sprinklers reduces the likelihood of death from fire by more than 82 percent. The most effective fire loss prevention and reduction measure for both life and property is the installation and maintenance of fire sprinklers.

House of Worship Fire Safety Day

Fire departments also provide home safety visits and would be glad to tailor an inspection to a house of worship. During a house of worship safety visit, the fire service personnel will identify

and alleviate potential risks to reduce hazards in and around the house of worship. These safety visits are a proven way to reduce fire injuries and deaths. Some of the potential risks include:

- Ensuring fire extinguishers are available on every level of the building and near areas where fires are more likely to occur, such as the kitchen, garage and grill. Make sure the leaders receive training how to use the extinguisher.
- Checking if candles often play an important role in services. Make sure candle placement is away from curtains and other furniture or products where items can easily catch fire. Educate the leaders about candle safety and alternatives to candles, such as flameless candles.
- Checking used outlets to ensure they are not being overloaded and checking cords for frays.
- Making sure child locks are installed on all cabinets used to store dangerous items, such as poisons, cleaners, matches and lighters.
- Inspecting deadbolt locks. Can they be unlocked from the inside without a key? Can a child or member with disabilities work the locks and get out in the event of a fire or other emergency?
- Asking if the church has alert devices for people who are hard of hearing.

Crime Prevention Day

Contact your local police department, and ask them to come out and identify security weaknesses. The police department will assist in recognizing security flaws and will offer solutions to reduce your vulnerability to an arsonist or burglar.

Clean-Up Day

Many of the vulnerabilities, hazards and safety concerns identified during fire and crime safety activities can be resolved during a clean-up day at your house of worship. In addition to making Jack a dull boy, all work and no play makes for a tedious day. Have congregation members provide food and drinks to volunteers participating in clean-up activities. Sprucing up the grounds of your house of worship will instill pride among the congregation. Specific tasks include: trimming trees and shrubbery, cleaning windows, and removing all possible sources of ignition, such as flammable liquids, combustible materials and trash.