

Feds release first guidelines for confronting a church shooter

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—For the first time, the federal government has issued written guidelines for houses of worship confronted with a homicidal gunman.

Vice President Joe Biden released the new rules six months after the school shooting in Newtown, Conn., that left 26 dead, including 20 children.



Pryor Creek Community Church is one of a few dozen churches around the country that are offering concealed carry certification classes as a way to reach out to non-Christians or to attract new members. (RNS photo courtesy iStockPhoto.) Beyond seeking shelter and waiting for police to arrive, as many Newtown victims did, the new rules also advise adults in congregations to fight back—as a last resort—in a bid to stop the shooter. The new federal doctrine is “run, fight or hide.”

After Congress failed to pass a slew of gun safety measures in April, Biden

said the executive branch is doing what it can, promising to put gun control legislation back in lawmakers' hands, and pointing to 21 executive actions to beef up gun safety taken by the administration since Newtown.

He also unveiled three new federal guidebooks to keep institutions safe—one for schools, one for colleges and one for houses of worship.

Although shootings at churches and other houses of worship remain relatively rare, they can make inviting targets for shooters—particularly disturbed individuals—who are looking for a highly visible target to settle a grudge or make a political statement.

Last year, a gunman killed six people inside a Sikh temple in Oak Creek, Wis. In 2008, a gunman killed two people inside a Unitarian church in Knoxville, Tenn. In 2007, a gunman killed two people inside the New Life megachurch in Colorado Springs, Colo., before being shot and killed by an armed volunteer.

As federal officials worked with education officials in crafting new school-safety rules, they also consulted clergy, Biden told a White House auditorium filled with federal officials who have worked on the issue.

Congregations at risk

“The faith leaders not only want us to talk about making schools safer,” Biden said. “They’re worried that their congregations are at risk. So they wanted to know, what should they be thinking about when someone stands up in the middle of the congregation and decides to do something similar as we saw in the schools.”

In response to their concerns, Biden said, “we gave concrete direction.”

The guidelines’ basic run-fight-hide advice is similar to that given to schools faced with active shooters. Worshippers should first try to flee the

scene, taking people with them but not waiting for those who refuse to leave. If flight is not possible, hide—the guidelines describe some of the best hiding places. Fighting back is a last resort.

Fighting back

According to the new rules, gathered in a 38-page document called “Guide for Developing High-Quality Emergency Operations Plans for Houses of Worship,” fighting back is advised for “adults in immediate danger.”

They should: “Consider trying to disrupt or incapacitate the shooter by using aggressive force and items in their environment, such as fire extinguishers or chairs. In a study of 41 active shooter events that ended before law enforcement arrived, the potential victims stopped the attacker themselves in 16 instances. In 13 of those cases, they physically subdued the attacker.”

The question of how best to subdue a gunman is likely to rekindle a debate within many churches, particularly in parts of the country where it is common to carry weapons. Should members of the congregation bring guns to church?

Guns in church?

“Each house of worship should determine, as part of its planning process, policies on the control and presence of weapons, as permitted by law,” the guidelines say.

It also says individuals must make their own decisions about how best to respond when confronted by an active shooter.

Although the booklet was unveiled at an event on gun violence, it focuses on emergency preparedness in general, whether for a shooter, an arsonist or a hurricane. A section focuses on “active shooter situations.”