

## **Selecting your Safety Team: How to ensure good fits**

*By Bob Neidig*

Safety team members are vested with significant responsibility, so ensuring recruits meet the necessary qualifications is critical. This team will serve a critical role in a church's safety and security plan, as well as being the face of the church to attendees and visitors. So, what are the desirable qualities in a safety team member, and what criteria can be employed to ensure a candidate is properly vetted?

***Safety Team – Safety and Security.*** There are many factors one must look at when assembling volunteer members for a Safety Team. To begin with, there are two functions of the team: Safety and Security. Among non-security hazards, a Safety Team includes a Medical Team to address medical emergencies, which necessarily entails different skills and training. The other component – Security – requires specific experience, specialized knowledge, and training.

***Initial Vetting.*** Following the spate of recent church shootings, individuals may be prompted to volunteer to serve on a Security Team, and while their willingness to serve may be commendable, they may not have the necessary skill, demeanor, and judgment. If you let everyone who wants to volunteer for your team be a member, your team will become dysfunctional at some point, not to mention having weak links. That said, ideally, most of your team members should be self-directed and need minimal supervision after they are trained on your team protocols. If your selection process is weak you will end up with some people, who even after training, will need to be constantly directed and unable make decisions in a timely manner, which could affect the team and its critical performance.

One option for vetting volunteer Safety Team members is to find other volunteer roles (parking lot attendant, for example) in which they can serve in order to observe their performance and get feedback from other

staff and volunteers. Service in an adjunct capacity can provide them valuable experience getting to know the church, its staff, and congregants. Once they have proven their capability in a different role, they may be recruited to serve on the Safety Team.

**Selection Criteria.** So let's start with the basics. Given a Safety Team member serves in a position of trust, the selection process must start with a volunteer application and background check. A criminal background check is critical to exclude those with criminal histories or sex offenses. (Federal law prohibits felons from being in possession of firearms.) You also want to obtain a copy of the applicant's driver's license. And, if they served in the military, their DD-214 (military discharge form) to make sure they were honorably discharged.

**Positive ID.** That a volunteer may act deceptively and provide false information is not uncommon. There have been a number of cases where a potential volunteer fills out an application and provides their correct social security number but purposely spells their name incorrectly on the application. Their background check is returned with no issues or red flags. Only later do you find out they are a registered sex offender. That is why it is important to check the applicant's name on their Driver's license so it matches the name on their application. (For those churches that provide a vehicle to patrol the church grounds, a motor vehicle check is also critical for insurance purposes.)

**Interviewing.** Once the applicant has been cleared, you need to set up an interview to include yourself, and the church staff who is responsible for your ministry. The interview should include questions about their motivation for volunteering for the Safety Team. Other questions can include posing different hypothetical scenarios to the applicant, asking them what issues and concerns they identify, and how they would respond to the situation, e.g., a confrontation between an estranged married couple, active shooter, vandal, suspicious person, mentally ill person, etc. They may not have the answers you are looking for based on your team's protocols because they have not been trained yet, but you will get a good feel for how well they think on their feet. Most importantly, you should

pray with your church leadership for discernment in making the right decision when selecting members.

***Personal qualities.*** So let's talk about the type of people that might be a good fit for this type of volunteer position. You want people who have good observational skills and can assess behavior quickly. Current or former police officers, correctional officers, and military personnel all have suitable backgrounds. It is important to remember that the Safety Team is part of the church's ministry, so even though someone projects a confident personality, equally important is personable demeanor. In my experience, people in management roles or who are self-employed do very well in these positions, once they are trained on your policies. These positions require good communication skills, interacting with different personality types, and use of conflict resolution techniques.

***Probationary periods.*** Finally, after all the paperwork is completed, it is important that the new volunteer undergo a probationary period to allow them time for training and gaining on-the-job experience. This period (6-months to a year) also allows an opportunity for team leaders to observe and provide feedback. In some cases, a person who initially looked like a good fit may turn out not to be. Having explained to the candidate ahead of time the requirement to complete a probationary period, makes easier a decision not to make the appointment permanent. Security Teams positions require a lot of training (and may be a paid position), so obtaining a one-year commitment from the volunteer should be required to avoid investing time and expense on a member who serves only a short time.

Of course, much more could be written about a sound team member selection process, but this overview provides a basic foundation on which your church's program can be developed.

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