

Risk Reporter

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Responding to sex offenders who want to join your congregation

How would your congregation react if they knew a convicted sex offender was worshipping among them each Sunday morning? This controversial question is something congregations across the country are currently asking themselves.

Unfortunately, there is no one-size-fits-all answer. Experts recommend that staff members proactively address this question by developing a sex offender policy.

Kristen Blanford, partner at Hermes Sargent Bates law firm in Dallas, Texas, understands that liabilities are attached when religious organizations are dealing with sex offenders.

"How it's handled really comes down to each congregation's individual faith beliefs and ministries," Blanford said.

She recommends that leadership teams consider a few critical questions when developing a sex offender policy for their congregation:

1. What are the core beliefs of the organization?

Do you support including everyone, or do you specify who is able to attend or become a member of your congregation?

2. Do you have established ministries for urban communities or walk-in traffic?

Do you already have a prison ministry or an urban community outreach program that might attract convicted sex offenders?

3. What will your congregation tolerate?

Will your congregation react positively or negatively to opening your doors to sex offenders?

4. What are the risks to the congregation?

Will allowing the offender to participate in the organization put any current members at risk?

The answers to these questions will likely be different for each congregation. Some might decide not to allow a known sex offender to remain or become a member of the congregation. Others might allow a known sex offender to remain involved but with the stipulation that he or she adhere to specific guidelines. No matter what policy you choose, the protection of children, youth and others in your congregation is paramount.

If an organization chooses to create guidelines for sex offender participation, the process for developing guidelines should be handled carefully, notes Richard Hammar, an attorney and CPA who specializes in legal and tax issues for churches and clergy.

(See Sex offenders, Page 2)

Inside

Seasonal Spotlight

Work safely outdoors in summer heat

Managing Your Risks

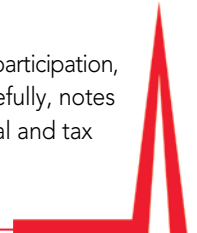
Propping open a fire door

Q I A

Risk Reporter talks with Russell Kendzior about tile floors

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(Sex offenders)

"A practice some organizations follow is to have a sex offender policy drafted and then presented to the church membership at an annual or specially called business meeting for consideration, modification and approval," Hammar said.

Service offerings

Some congregations welcome sex offenders into regular services by restricting the person to a specific service or by requiring the offender to report in and be accompanied by an escort at all times. If a congregation is not comfortable with sex offenders attending regular services, there are many other options to consider.

Some pastors choose to meet regularly, one-on-one, with the offender to provide spiritual support for the person outside of the congregation's weekly services.

Other congregations, such as First Congregational United Church of Christ in Madison, Wis., are introducing adult-only services to help sex offenders who aren't allowed to be in the presence of children.

Rev. Jerry Hancock, director of prison ministries for the Madison-based church, became aware that a number of people were unable to attend religious services with children present for therapeutic or legal reasons. To meet this need, he established a biweekly, adult-only service — which is not just for sex offenders but provides a service where convicted sex offenders are welcome to worship. During the service, there are no children's activities anywhere on the property.

Child interaction

For many religious organizations, the biggest fear is that by allowing sex offenders in their house of worship, they are endangering the children in their congregation. With this in mind, many organizations will stipulate in their sex offender policy that a known sex offender cannot participate in any of the child or youth programs in any way.

Most organizations already have child protection measures in place, such as no child should ever be alone with fewer than two adults, all Sunday school classrooms must have windows and all child and youth ministry volunteers must undergo background checks before participating in activities. These preventive measures help ensure that children in the congregation remain safe at all times.

Disclosure

Another factor that religious organizations should consider when developing a sex offender policy is whether to disclose the identity of the sex offender to the congregation.

Maia Christopher, executive director of the Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers (ATSA), advises religious organizations to provide some level of disclosure and communications to their congregations.

"Open communication allows members to ask questions and usually helps everyone feel more comfortable with the

decision to allow sex offenders to worship," Christopher said. "It's best to have these discussions before the sex offender begins attending the service."

For legal reasons, some experts recommend that disclosure be provided to all members of the congregation. Others suggest notifying only parents of minors if the offender was convicted for adult to child sexual abuse.

"Because of legal issues implicated in providing congregational notification of the presence of sex offenders in the church, it is advisable for religious leaders to seek legal counsel when formulating disclosures," Hammar said.

Individualized plans

Christopher reminds faith-based organizations that not all sex offenders offend in the same way and suggests that supervision should be tailored to the offender through collaboration with the offender's parole or treatment officer. In some cases, it is a violation of probation or parole for an offender to attend functions at which minors are present, which makes consultation with a probation officer essential.

"Sometimes, broad policies are established to proactively protect the congregation," Christopher said. "But it's critical for the staff to meet with the offender to understand his or her individual situation in order to determine the best way to integrate him or her into the community."

Hammar has found that in some cases, exclusion of specific offenders from church is the only viable option. This option is advisable if (1) for any reason the offender cannot adhere to the guidelines outlined in the organization's predetermined policy, (2) if the offender's crimes are so frequent or heinous that exclusion is the only appropriate option or (3) one or more of the offender's victims attends the church.

Identification

For congregations wondering how to find out if they have convicted sex offenders in their midst, Blanford recommends conducting some simple research.

All states have an online sex offender public registry that is freely available to search. These registries exist to inform the public of the identity and whereabouts of all registered offenders.

If an offender is identified through research or even if someone provides the information up front, religious organizations should conduct a criminal background check to determine the exact charges and conviction.

Blanford also suggests that congregations revisit their sex offender policies annually. As laws and members change, it's important to have fresh perspectives on this topic.

If your congregation doesn't currently have an established sex offender policy, Church Mutual offers a Child and Youth Abuse Prevention Program online, which includes Sex Offender Policy options. Visit www.churchmutual.com, click on "Safety Resources" and select "Child and Youth Sexual Abuse."



Seasonal Spotlight

Propping open a fire door

A practice we see used occasionally in buildings that Church Mutual insures is the intentional “propping open” of interior fire doors. Well-meaning people use this work practice to make it more convenient for themselves and others to move from one part of a building to another without the need to open a door.

Typically, these fire doors are located between sections of a building that have fire divisions, such as between an education wing and fellowship hall or sanctuary. In other cases, we see this practice being used to prop open fire doors leading into exit stairwells.

Fire doors are designed, tested, rated and labeled by organizations, such as Underwriters Laboratories, to withstand the spread of fire for specified time periods — such as a two-hour-rated door or a three-hour-rated door. To perform up to its full protection potential, a fire door must be properly installed in a fire resistive wall, and the door must be closed within its door frame.

For example, if a fire started in a fellowship hall and the fire door between the fellowship hall and education wing was propped open with a wedge, there is an increased possibility that fire or smoke might spread more rapidly to the education wing. However, if the door is closed, it acts as an added barrier to help restrict the spread of fire and smoke into the education wing during the time the fire department is attempting to extinguish the fire.

Fire doors should be kept in a closed position in interior exit stairwells too. This helps restrict the spread of fire and smoke into an exit stairwell — a condition that could have a devastating impact on people attempting to use that means of egress.

When you see a fire door propped open with a brick or wedge, make it a point to change that work practice at your facility and keep the door closed. This safety practice has the potential to help save lives and property.

Edward A. Steele
Risk Control Manager

Work safely outdoors in summer heat

Many congregations rely on staff and volunteers to help with lawn care, construction and landscaping projects during the hot summer months. However, performing strenuous activities in humid, warm weather can be dangerous. According to the United States Department of Labor Occupational Safety & Health Administration, each year thousands of workers become sick or die from exposure to heat.

“Working in hot temperatures can be very dangerous,” said Dr. David Michaels, assistant secretary of labor for the Occupational Safety & Health Administration. “But heat-related illness and death are preventable.”

Preventing illness

“Workers who are new to outdoor jobs are at the greatest risk for heat-related illness,” Michaels said. “It’s important to gradually increase their workload and allow more frequent breaks to help new workers acclimate to hot working conditions.”

Workers should wear hats and light-colored, loose-fitting clothes and hydrate by drinking fluids containing electrolytes.

“If possible, schedule strenuous activities for the early morning or evening, especially on days with extremely high heat indexes,” Michaels said. “A heat index above 105 °F has the potential to cause severe heat disorders.”

Recognize the signs

“Recognizing and treating the symptoms of heat-related illness early can help prevent a serious medical condition,” Michaels said.

Symptoms of heat exhaustion include headaches, dizziness, cramps, fainting, weakness, wet skin, irritability, thirst and nausea or vomiting. Workers suffering from heat exhaustion are at greater risk for accidents, since they are less alert and can become confused.

Common signs of heat stroke include confusion; convulsions; passing out; lack of sweat; high temperature; seizures; and red, hot and dry skin. Heat stroke can be fatal and doesn’t always kill immediately. It can shut down major body organs, causing acute heart, liver, kidney and muscle damage; nervous system problems; and blood disorders. If someone displays these symptoms, seek medical attention immediately.

Responding to symptoms

If someone is displaying signs of heat illness, quickly move the person to a cool place and don’t leave them alone. Call 911 if necessary. Slowly give the person water. Loosen his or her clothing and help cool the person by fanning, putting ice packs in the groin area and underarms or applying cool compresses.

If a worker recently experienced heat-related symptoms, give him or her at least a day to recuperate out of the hot temperatures.

- **For more information** on working safely in summer heat, visit www.churchmutual.com or www.OSHA.gov.

Q | A

A Perspective

Slips and falls represent one of the most common claims for Church Mutual customers. In 2011, slips and falls accounted for 40.5 percent of employee claims and 63 percent of claims involving volunteers, guests and members.

According to the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC), floors and flooring materials contribute directly to more than 2 million fall injuries each year. For many congregations, tile is one of the most common floor options. However, tile also presents unique safety challenges, particularly when wet.

Risk Reporter spoke with Russell Kendzior, founder and chairman of the board of the National Floor Safety Institute (NFSI), about helping to prevent slips and falls on tile floors.



■ **For more information** about preventing slips and falls, visit www.churchmutual.com, select "Safety Resources," followed by "General Risks."

Risk Reporter: What role does flooring play in helping to prevent slip-and-fall injuries?

Kendzior: According to the National Floor Safety Institute, about 55 percent of all slip, trip and fall incidents are a direct result of an unsafe walking surface. The type of flooring, as well as care and maintenance of the floor, is incredibly important, especially in high traffic areas, such as entryways.

Risk Reporter: What should an organization look for when selecting new flooring?

Kendzior: Many congregations use tile flooring for entry and high-traffic walkways because of durability and ease of care. However, these hard surfaces can be extremely slippery when wet. When selecting a surface, you want to look for a material that will maintain a wet static coefficient friction of 0.60 or greater, or a wet dynamic coefficient of friction of 0.42 or greater.

Risk Reporter: Do you have any recommendations for improving slip resistance with proper floor care?

Kendzior: The most important step in caring for a tile floor is to use floor care products that do not leave a slippery film. The NFSI independently tests floor cleaning products for the ability to either enhance or hinder traction. A list of NFSI-certified cleaning products can be found at www.nfsi.org.

When cleaning floors, don't use any more soap than necessary and be sure to remove all traces of the cleaner.

Soap, wax and other floor finishes can eventually build up, resulting in a slippery surface. If general cleaning doesn't restore the slip-resistant nature of a floor, consider using a chemical safety treatment to help remove built-up residue. A list of certified treatments is also available on the website.

Risk Reporter: Is there anything a congregation can do to help reduce slips if they have an existing tile floor that doesn't meet the recommended coefficient of friction?

Kendzior: We find that organizations often use area or entrance mats to cover a slippery floor in high-traffic areas. However, this is not the best option since a mat could buckle or curl, adding an additional trip hazard to the area. A simple and cost-effective solution is to install "walk-off" carpet tile to the area instead. Walk-off carpet tiles can be installed directly over the existing floor and provide superior performance in removing both soil and moisture from pedestrian footwear.

There also are many products or treatments available that claim to increase the coefficient of friction or slip resistance of tile. We recommend using caution with these treatments as many can actually damage the surface of the flooring, making it difficult to care for and clean.