Congregation Chabad Synagogue in Poway, California

On Friday, April 27, 2019, at approximately 11:20 am, a shooting occurred at the Congregation Chabad Synagogue in Poway, California. Its members were celebrating the Sabbath and end of the Passover holiday. John Earnest, age 19, armed with an AR-15 type assault rifle killed 1 person and wounded 3 others. It has been reported that Earnest’s weapon “jammed.” His inability to continue shooting and engaging victims likely caused him to abandon his plan and flee.

As Earnest was leaving the scene, Oscar Stewart, an Army veteran of the Iraq War, rushed at him. Stewart chased after him as he fled the synagogue to a vehicle parked nearby. Stewart caught up to the vehicle as Earnest was about to drive away. While Stewart was near the vehicle, Jonathan Morales, an off-duty Border Patrol agent who was attending services at the synagogue, shot at the vehicle. Earnest was able to get away, but was captured a short time later. Earnest was taken into custody and charged with one count of murder and three counts of attempted murder.


“...I heard gunshots,” And everybody got up and started trying to get out the back door, so I – for whatever reason – I didn’t do that. I ran the other way. I ran towards the gun shots.”

“I knew I had to be within five feet of this guys [sic] so his rifle couldn’t get to me...So I ran immediately toward him, and I yelled as loud as I could. And he was scared. I scared the hell out of him.”

By the time Stewart reached Earnest in the church’s lobby, the shooter’s assault rifle had miraculously jammed after firing off six rounds, the synagogue’s rabbi, Yisroel Goldstein, told The Post.

Stewart’s heroism and decision to confront the shooter is among the precepts of the “Run, Hide, Fight” principles of the armed assailant response. Stewart reacted and opted to “fight.”
There was no shortage of selflessness and heroism among the congregants. In addition to the actions of Stewart and Morales, Lori Kaye sacrificed her life in an effort to shield Rabbi Yisroel Goldstein from the shooter. Goldstein was also among those wounded. Almog Peretz, who was wounded, led children through an emergency exit door to safety outside. They all understood that they had to act.

This incident came six months to the day of the shooting at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. There continues to be a progression of self-awareness and the recognition of one’s vulnerability in houses of worship. More and more organizations are understanding the potential for violence within their facility and are taking measures to prepare themselves. Security assessments and implementing recommended changes should be part of any crisis management plan. Armed intruder and victim sustainability training for staff and congregants has demonstrated it will increase their chances of survivability.

**Basic Considerations All Houses of Worship**

1. Liaison with local law enforcement partners in an effort to have a visible presence outside the Congregation. A readily identifiable law enforcement presence can be a strong deterrent to any would be assailant.

2. Use of off duty police officers as internal/external security. Sworn officers will have specific training and the applicable experience for the best response. If private security is the only option, ensure proper vetting of the provider. One will want to ensure that they have the requisite resources and training for an armed response and they have an established protocol to communicate with local law enforcement.

3. Lock exterior doors once the service begins so no one from the outside can gain access without being allowed in by a security officer. A locked door won’t stop a dedicated assailant, but it will slow him/her down. This will help identify that something untoward is beginning, giving people on the inside additional time to react.

4. Be cognizant of people who appear dressed out of place (*i.e. bulky clothing, heavy jackets during summer months*). Armed assailants often dress in a manner that allows the concealment of weapons. Past events have shown that many carry backpacks in order hide weapons and carry additional ammunition.

5. Security assessments should be an integral part of any crisis management plan and will identify areas of improvement such as access control, CCTV coverage, need for additional exit doors and/or emergency windows, etc. The ability for people to get out of the building in an emergency is critical. The first element of the “Run, Hide, Fight” principle is to “Run” or get out of the building. Too often, buildings are constructed with a “one way in, one way out” design which limits one’s ability to escape and may put them directly into harm’s way or an obstruction which would prevent them from exiting.

6. Active shooter and victim sustainability training is essential for everyone. This should include basic weapons recognition and an understanding of how they function. While few may recognize the sound of “gun shots”, all are familiar with the sound of “firecrackers.” Being able to immediately discern that one is in the midst of a shooting allows one to react. Knowing that a weapon has malfunctioned or that the shooter needs to reload, provides one the opportunity to move or even confront the assailant.
7. Have trauma supplies available with public access and in an easily identifiable area, such as next to the Automated External Defibrillator (AED). No matter how rapid the arrival of professional emergency personnel, those already at the scene will be the first to respond. A person who is bleeding can die from blood loss within 5 minutes. Therefore, it is important to stop the bleeding quickly. For the most part, we are referring to those who have suffered wounds to their extremities. They will succumb within minutes to blood loss unless immediate efforts are made through the application of tourniquets and pressure bandages to staunch the blood flow.

*Training, situational awareness and quick recognition as the event unfolds can save lives. It’s important to recognize what we can do within our space to maximize getting people to safety and to treat life threatening injuries before the arrival of first responders. Understand that if you’re hearing gun fire, people have already been shot and the fight for your survival and those around you has begun.*