



# Responding to Threats of Harm

## A Practical Guide for Ministries

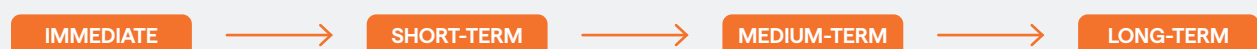
**Designed to help ministry leaders, staff, and volunteers respond swiftly, responsibly, and lawfully to a credible threat of harm (including self-harm).**

- While laws vary by state, ministry personnel are often legally obligated to act.
- Regardless of legal mandates, ministries should respond promptly and appropriately to advance their Christian mission.

### **Learn how to:**

- Respond immediately, including clear steps to follow in the hours thereafter.
- Establish protocols and train staff/volunteers.
- Ensure legal compliance and protect the ministry.

### **Recommended responses in four phases:**



**Important:** This information is intended to be helpful, but does not constitute legal advice and is not a substitute for the advice from a licensed attorney in your area. We strongly encourage you to regularly consult with a local attorney as part of your risk management program.

# Responding to Threats of Harm

Guidance for ministries



**When a ministry worker becomes aware of a credible threat of harm (including self-harm):**

**IMMEDIATELY**

## Assess Threat

The worker evaluates the gravity of the threat.

**If the threat is imminent or sufficiently serious, call 911.**

**If the threat is less serious, move to next step.**

**WITHIN 1 HR**

## Alert Ministry Leadership

The worker reports the matter to a designated response team/point person.

**WITHIN 12 HRS**

## Alert Others\*

The team/point person determines whether there is a legal and/or moral duty to warn others of the threat.

**If yes, notify the appropriate parties (target of threat, relatives, law enforcement) and move to next step.**

**If no, move to next step.**

**WITHIN 48 HRS**

## Alert Insurance Carrier

The team/point person determines whether the threat of harm could expose the ministry to liability.

**If yes, notify the ministry's property and liability insurance company and move to next step.**

**If no, move to next step.**

**WITHIN 72 HRS**

## Address the Situation

The team/point person determines appropriate next steps, consulting with local legal counsel if needed.

### Potential next steps may include:

- Conducting an internal investigation
- Removing the threat-maker from future participation in ministry activities
- Revising the ministry's policies/procedures
- Connecting the victim with support resources
- Informing additional parties (e.g., the victim's relatives, staff members, and/or the congregation)

**\*Legal duties, including mandatory reporting laws, differ by state. See RAINN's State Law Database (free to use), Church Law & Tax 50-State Child Abuse Reporting Laws Survey (requires a paid subscription), or contact a local attorney for guidance.**

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# Using the Ministry Response Guide

## Threats of Harm

Each of the four steps in the guide is described in more detail below.

### IMMEDIATELY

#### Assess Threat

Certain threats of harm demand the immediate involvement of emergency personnel. If the threat is imminent (i.e., suggests action without significant delay) or sufficiently serious (i.e., involves death or severe physical injury), ministry workers should dial 911 right away.

### WITHIN 1 HR

#### Alert Ministry Leadership

Ministry workers should report any credible threat of harm to a designated response team or point person. This ensures that ministry leadership is aware of the situation and equipped to execute its responsibilities. A centralized response protects confidentiality, maintains compliance with internal policies, and provides a clear record of the incident and its aftermath. Reporting to a team (rather than an individual) is recommended to avoid oversights and to prevent miscommunication.

### WITHIN 12 HRS

#### Alert Others

The response team or point person must determine whether there is a legal or ethical obligation to report the matter to state authorities or other interested parties, such as parents or guardians. Since legal duties vary between states, it may be necessary to consult local legal counsel to clarify requirements. Notifying the state's child protective services division or law enforcement ensures that professionals can investigate and intervene where warranted.

### WITHIN 48 HRS

#### Alert Insurance Carrier

If an incident or potential incident carries potential liability for the ministry, the response team or point person should notify the ministry's property and casualty (P&C) insurance carrier. Prompt notification allows the insurer to assess risks, offer guidance, and prepare for any legal or financial consequences. Failing to notify the insurer quickly could jeopardize coverage.

### WITHIN 72 HRS

#### Address the Situation

In addition to external reporting, ministries must look inward to respond effectively. Potential next steps could include launching an internal investigation, temporarily prohibiting an individual causing a threat of harm from participating in ministry activities, updating policies to prevent future threats of self-harm, and providing support to victims.

In some cases, multiple steps must be taken simultaneously to ensure a comprehensive response.

# Example Scenarios:

The following two example scenarios are intended to help provide some context around when and how to respond to threats of harm.

## Scenario 1: Threat of Imminent Self-Harm

IMMEDIATELY

**Assess Threat Example:** A youth group leader overhears a teen discussing their plan to commit suicide. Recognizing the urgency, the leader immediately calls 911 to request emergency intervention.

WITHIN 1 HR

**Alert Ministry Leadership Example:** After calling 911, the leader informs the ministry's response team to coordinate next steps.

WITHIN 12 HRS

**Alert Others Example:** The team contacts the teen's parents and school counselor to secure continued care.

WITHIN 48 HRS

**Alert Insurance Carrier Example:** The team performs a risk analysis and consults local legal counsel. Based on their assessment, they determine that liability is unlikely and that notification to the insurer is unnecessary.

WITHIN 72 HRS

**Address the Situation Example:** The ministry updates its self-harm prevention protocols and provides ongoing support to the teen.

## Scenario 2: Threat of Harm Targeting a Peer

IMMEDIATELY

**Assess Threat Example:** A child reports to a small group leader that a peer has threatened them with physical harm. The leader is unsure whether the threat warrants a police report.

WITHIN 1 HR

**Alert Ministry Example:** The leader asks the ministry's response team to evaluate the situation.

WITHIN 12 HRS

**Alert Others Example:** After interviewing the children involved, the team determines that law enforcement does not need to be contacted. However, the team decides to inform both sets of parents.

WITHIN 48 HRS

**Alert Insurance Carrier Example:** Out of an abundance of caution, the team notifies the insurance carrier.

WITHIN 72 HRS

**Address the Situation Example:** The ministry temporarily prohibits the threat-maker from participating in ministry activities and provides counseling to both individuals.