

Massachusetts State Officials offer advice for preventing arson at houses of worship after two synagogue fires

Investigators from the Arlington and Needham Fire and Police Departments, Massachusetts State Police, the Office of the State Fire Marshal, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), and the Federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) are working together to investigate two arson fires at a residence/synagogue in Arlington and one at a Needham synagogue. The first Arlington fire occurred on May 12, 2019, and a second fire was set at the same location last night. In Needham last night, there was also an intentionally set fire at a synagogue. The investigative team is bringing all necessary resources to these fires, which may or may not be connected.

State Fire Marshal Peter J. Ostroskey said, "Every arson fire causes fear and anxiety in the community, but one in a house of worship more so because of the possibility a group was targeted for violence." He added, "There are steps that houses of worship can take to protect themselves from both accidental and intentionally-set fires,"

Preventing Arson at Houses of Worship

Preventing arson at houses of worship covers three main areas: external security, internal security, and community awareness. Here are some steps the public can take:

External Security

- Illuminate the exterior and entrances. (Use shielded fixtures with warm light bulbs of Correlated Color Temperature

CCT- of 3,000 K or less. Avoid bright white or blue lights for better visibility.)

- Use motion-activated lighting near doors and windows.
- Keep shrubbery and trees trimmed so the building can be observed by passing patrols. •
- Do not allow church signs to block the view of the building.
- Many buildings have basement entries that are hidden from view. These should be secured with locking, ground-level doors when the building is not in use.
- Ladders, external stairways, and fire escapes allowing access to the roof should be secured.
- Painting the building white or constructing it with light-colored brick makes a human figure more readily seen at night.
- Consider fencing the areas or sides that are not readily visible to patrols or neighbors.

Internal Security

- Install smoke alarms and a fire sprinkler system.
- Keep doors and windows locked.
- Clean up – Remove anything that could fuel a fire for an arsonist.

Community Awareness

- Establish an arson watch program. For information on how, download the U.S. fire Administration's Community Arson Prevention pamphlet.
- Use our free brochure PDF 1.4 MB, handout PDF 586 KB or poster PDF 348 KB to spread the word about arson prevention.
- Keep congregation leaders informed of problems.
- Be aware of individuals who may be disgruntled or likely to cause damage to property through arson or vandalism.
- Be aware that vandalism may precede arson!
- Open avenues of communication with fire and law enforcement officials regarding the arson problem places of worship are facing.
- Appoint a person from the congregation to be a liaison with

law and fire officials.

- Promote neighborhood watches and educate the neighbors with the lighting arrangements (motion lights, etc.).
- Educate neighbors on recognizing unusual activities.
- Encourage neighbors to make note of strangers spending time in the neighborhood, either on foot or in vehicles.
- Write down the license plate numbers of suspicious vehicles and inform the proper authorities.
- Do not advertise on signs or bulletins when the place of worship will not be in use.

Reverend James Tilbe, chief chaplain of the Massachusetts Corps of Fire Chaplains said, "There is no arson fire that tears at the fabric of a community more than one involving a house of worship. These are sacred spaces where people connect to their God and to each other."

There have been 21 arson fires in houses of worship over the past decade (2009-2018) in Massachusetts. One of the most notorious occurred the night Barack Obama was elected President in Springfield, November 5, 2008. The Church of the Macedonia God in Christ was a storefront church attended mostly by African Americans. Eventually, three youths were arrested and charged with setting the fire. But not only Christian churches have been victimized. There have been fires at Jewish synagogues, Hindu temples and Muslim mosques as well.