Extreme Risk Protection Orders:

A CLERGY RESOURCE GUIDE

How Faith Leaders Can Support Congregants and Communities in Times of Firearm-Related Emergencies

SEPTEMBER 2026

FAITH LEADERS FOR Ending Gun Violence

JOHNS HOPKINS BLOOMBERG SCHOOL of PUBLIC HEALTH | Center for Gun Violence Solutions

FAITHS UNITED TO PREVENT GUN VIOLENCE

About This Guide

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This guide was co-authored by the Johns Hopkins Center for Gun Violence Solutions, Faiths United to Prevent Gun Violence, and Faith Leaders for Ending Gun Violence. The Johns Hopkins Center for Gun Violence Solutions contributed expertise in Extreme Risk Protection Orders (ERPOs), firearm policy, research, and implementation, collaborating on listening sessions and the drafting, review, revision, and design of the guide. Faiths United to Prevent Gun Violence and Faith Leaders for Ending Gun Violence contributed by organizing listening sessions with faith leaders and coalition partners, collaborating on drafting, review, and revisions, and gathering and incorporating feedback from their faith networks throughout the guide's development to help ensure the resource reflects the experiences, needs, and priorities of diverse faith communities.

The co-authors representing our faith partner organizations contributed as members of the Faiths United to Prevent Gun Violence coalition and in their professional roles representing the Presbyterian Church (USA) Office of Public Witness, Jewish Women International, and Faith Leaders for Ending Gun Violence. We are grateful for their partnership, expertise, and ongoing commitment to equipping faith leaders and communities with practical tools and resources to respond to situations involving elevated risk of firearm violence.

About the Authoring Organizations

Johns Hopkins Center for Gun Violence Solutions

The Johns Hopkins Center for Gun Violence Solutions combines the expertise of respected gun violence researchers with the skills of experienced gun violence prevention advocates.

We use a public health approach to conduct rigorous scientific research to identify a range of innovative solutions to gun violence. Using the best available science, our Center works to expand evidence-based advocacy and policymaking efforts grounded in principles of equity. This combination of expertise creates a unique opportunity to turn public health research into action that reduces deaths and injuries from gun violence.

Visit our homepage at: https://publichealth.jhu.edu/center-for-gun-violence-solutions

Faiths United to Prevent Gun Violence

Faiths United to Prevent Gun Violence is a diverse coalition of faith traditions and faith-based organizations united by the call of their faiths to confront America's gun violence epidemic and to advocate for policies that reduce death and injury from gunfire.

Faith Leaders for Ending Gun Violence

Faith Leaders for Ending Gun Violence is supporting, strengthening, and partnering with faith leaders and their communities to end gun violence. We connect existing faith-led or involved gun violence prevention efforts to each other and to their communities for greater impact. Our work encourages and inspires faith communities across the country to put their prayers into action and discover the important role they play in the life-saving work of preventing gun violence.

Learn more about our work at: flegv.org and visit faithactionmap.org to join our growing network.

Jewish Women International

For 129 years, Jewish Women International (JWI) has been the leading Jewish organization championing women and girls. JWI is committed to ending gender-based violence and the conditions that allow it to persist—through expanding access to long-term economic security and advancing women's leadership. This work is grounded in the belief that all women deserve to be free from violence, equipped to shape their own lives, and supported by strong communities. Based in the United States and working with partners worldwide, JWI advances change through advocacy, education, and community-driven initiatives. JWI's participation in this project was made possible by a grant from the Lisa and Douglas Goldman Fund.

For more information, visit jwi.org.

Presbyterian Office of Public Witness (OPW)

The Presbyterian Office of Public Witness (OPW) is the public policy information and advocacy office for the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA). Its task is to advocate—and help the church to advocate—for the social witness perspectives and policies of the General Assembly. The church has a long history of applying its biblically and theologically based insights into social issues that affect the public and has maintained a public policy ministry in the nation's capital since 1946.

For more information, visit pcusa.org/opw.

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What Is an Extreme Risk Protection Order?

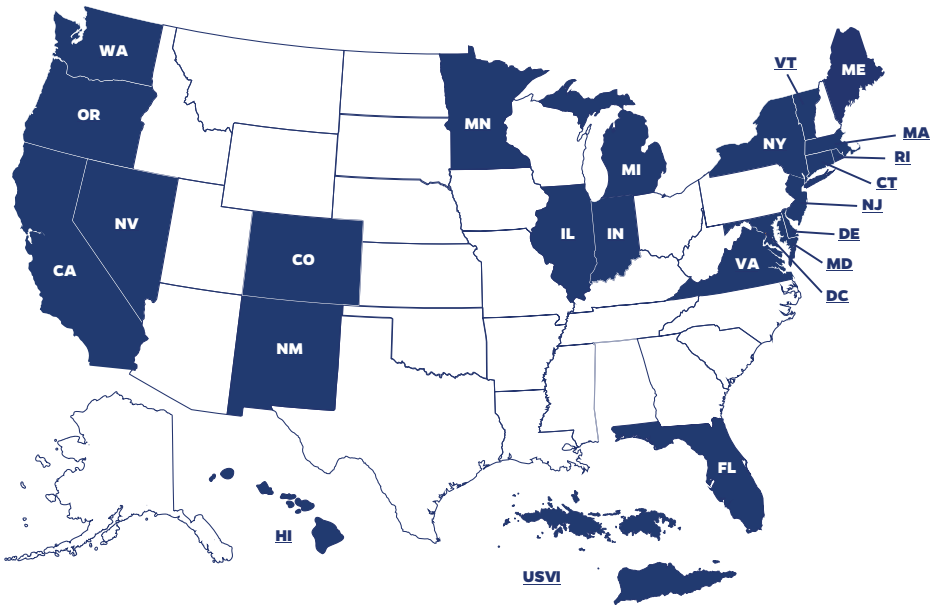
An Extreme Risk Protection Order (ERPO), also known as a "red flag" law, is a civil court order that temporarily restricts an individual's access to firearms when they are behaving dangerously or pose a high risk of harm to themselves or others.

By authorizing the temporary removal of firearms and prohibiting the individual subject to the order from purchasing, possessing, or accessing firearms while the order is in effect, ERPOs provide a critical opportunity to intervene and prevent firearm violence, including suicide, domestic violence, and mass violence.

A growing body of research demonstrates the potential for ERPO laws to prevent gun violence. A 2024 study found that one life is saved for every 17–23 ERPOs issued.[1]

ERPOs grant legal protections (also know as "reliefs") that allow for the temporary removal of firearms—and, in some states, ammunition, firearm accessories, concealed carry licenses, and other deadly weapons—from the respondent's possession and prohibit them from purchasing firearms (and in some places ammunition) for the duration of the order. An ERPO may be sought even if the person does not currently possess a firearm or is a minor.

As of September 2026, 22 states, the District of Columbia (DC), and the U.S. Virgin Islands (USVI) have enacted ERPO laws.



ERPOs are modeled after Domestic Violence Protection Orders (DVPOs), which have existed for decades and are in place in all 50 states, DC, and the U.S. territories.

Order Types

ERPO laws and their names vary by state, but the overall process is similar for most petitioners. The table below provides a general overview of order types, typical durations, available relief, and who may petition, reflecting common features and variations between states with ERPO laws.

Order Type	Typical Duration	Relief Offered	Who Can Petition
Emergency (Ex Parte/ Temporary) Orders Short-term order issued on an expedited basis when there is an immediate risk of firearm-related harm. If granted, the order remains in effect until a follow-up hearing to decide whether a final ERPO should be issued.	7–21 days	Requires the removal of firearms and prohibits possessing or purchasing firearms for the duration of the order. In some states, the order may also apply to ammunition, firearms accessories, other dangerous weapons, and permits to purchase or carry firearms.	In most states, clergy are not authorized to file an ERPO petition in their official role as faith leaders. Petitioner eligibility is defined by state law, and faith leaders may only petition if they have a qualifying relationship with the respondent as specified in the statute. **Examples of eligible petitioners vary by state but often include:** • Law enforcement • Family and household members • Physicians and mental health providers • School administrators
Final Orders Longer-term order issued after a full hearing where the respondent may appear and present evidence. If granted, the order may remain in effect for up to one year (order duration varies by state).	Up to 1 year		

Note: This is a general overview of ERPO laws nationally. These laws vary by state; for more details about your state's ERPO law visit the National ERPO Resource Center website.

More information can be found in the guide section, Eligible Petitioners.

SCAN QR CODE TO LEARN MORE ABOUT YOUR STATE

The Role of Faith Leaders

Faith leaders are often trusted first responders when someone in their community is experiencing a crisis and may be among the first to hear concerns about a person at risk of harming themselves or others.

While clergy are typically not eligible to file an ERPO petition with the court, they can play an important role by:

- Supporting family or community members who may be seeking an ERPO.
- Helping congregants and community members understand available options and resources.
- Connecting individuals and families with appropriate support services.
- Providing pastoral care during difficulty or crises.

Faith leaders may also consider whether an ERPO could be appropriate when there are credible threats against congregants, community members, or places of worship, and work with law enforcement or other eligible petitioners to help keep their communities safe.

Learn More

Visit the National Extreme Risk Protection Order (ERPO) Resource Center at the Johns Hopkins Center for Gun Violence Solutions for:

STATE-SPECIFIC ERPO INFORMATION

RESEARCH AND POLICY RESOURCES

IMPLEMENTATION GUIDANCE

REQUESTS FOR TRAINING AND TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

SCAN THE QR CODE TO LEARN MORE.

Executive Summary

In 2024, 44,447 people died from firearms in the United States—an average of one death every 12 minutes.[2] Of these, 27,593 were firearm suicides (about 62%), 15,364 were firearm homicides (about 34%), 450 were unintentional shootings (about 1%), and an estimated 636 deaths (about 1%) involved law enforcement.[2]

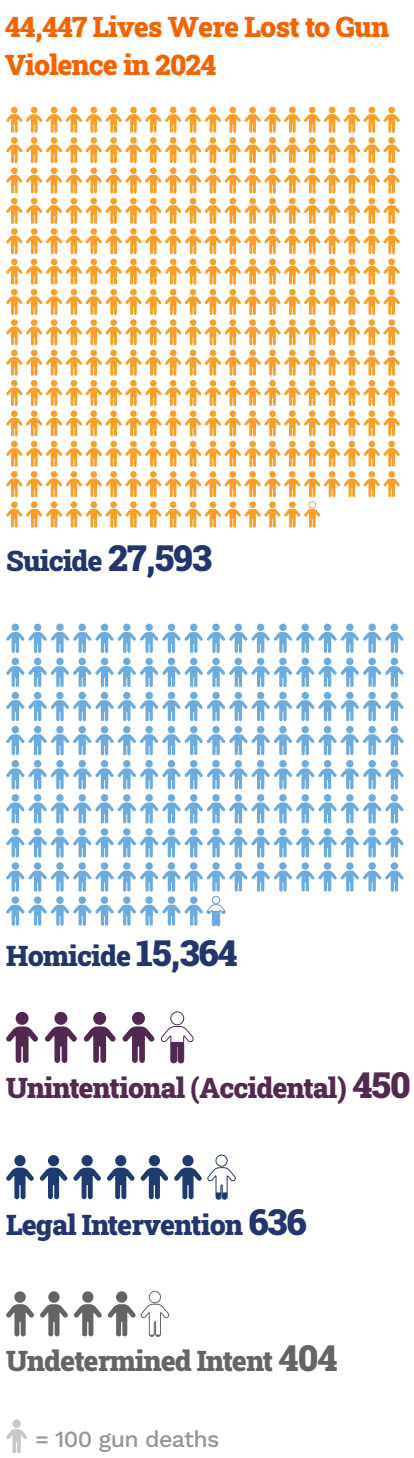
Firearm suicide has accounted for the majority of gun deaths each year since 1995 and has increased in recent years, even as firearm homicides have declined. Suicide is a public health crisis in the United States, and firearms are the most lethal method of suicide attempt.[3]

In many incidents of gun violence, warning signs are present that an individual may be at risk of harming themselves or others. Family members and close community members are often the first to recognize when someone is in crisis or exhibiting concerning behavior—creating an opportunity to act before a tragedy occurs.[4]

Extreme Risk Protection Orders (ERPOs) are one tool designed to support early action. The first risk-based firearm removal law, a precursor to modern ERPO laws, was enacted in Connecticut in 1999, and the second such law was adopted by Indiana in 2005.[5] In response to the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School, the Consortium for Risk-Based Firearm Policy convened in 2013 to identify risk factors for violence, review research, and develop policy recommendations.[5,6]

This work led to the creation of a risk-based firearm removal policy through civil court, initially called a Gun Violence Restraining Order (GVRO), now more widely known as an ERPO or as "red flag" laws. The policy builds on laws in Connecticut and Indiana, draws from existing Domestic Violence Protection Orders (DVPOs), and is grounded in research on risk factors for interpersonal and self-directed violence.[5] In 2016, California became the first state to enact the Consortium's recommended GVRO law.[5]

Today, more than half of Americans live in a state with an ERPO law, and research shows the promise of ERPOs in reducing firearm suicide and preventing potential acts of violence.[6] Effective implementation of ERPOs depends on coordination among stakeholders, including law enforcement, courts, clinicians, and community organizations.



Faith Leaders as Trusted Partners in Preventing Gun Violence

Faith communities have long been on the front lines of responding to crises. Clergy frequently support individuals and families in moments of deep distress—providing counsel, responding to mental health crises, and walking alongside those grieving losses.

In situations involving gun violence, faith leaders are often trusted confidants. You may be among the first to hear when someone is experiencing a crisis, expressing suicidal thoughts, or posing a risk of harm to others. You may also be called upon to support individuals and families after a firearm-related tragedy within your congregation or community.

Your pastoral role positions you to:

Recognize warning signs;

Guide individuals and families toward support; and

When appropriate, connect individuals concerned about harm with tools such as ERPOs that can help prevent harm.

Note on language:

Throughout this guide, we use the terms “congregants” and “congregation” to refer to individuals within a faith community and to the faith community as a whole. These terms may also be used interchangeably with “community members” and “community” to reflect the broader populations that faith leaders often serve, both within and beyond their religious communities.

The Basics: How ERPOs Work

This section provides an overview of the ERPO process. Understanding these steps can help you support congregants, families, and community members who may be considering this option. This is a general overview of ERPO laws nationwide; because these laws vary by state, you can find state-specific information here.

Types of Orders

EMERGENCY (EX PARTE/TEMPORARY) ERPOs

An emergency ERPO is a temporary court order designed to address imminent risk of harm quickly. These orders are typically issued ex parte, meaning without prior notice to or participation by the respondent. The court reviews the evidence provided in the petition and if the burden of proof is met, may issue the order based solely on the petitioner's submission.

If granted, the order allows for immediate relief, including the prompt removal of the respondent's firearms and a temporary prohibition on purchasing or possessing firearms. Due to their expedited nature, these orders are short term and remain in effect only until a follow-up hearing determines whether a final order will be issued.

FINAL ERPOs

A Final ERPO is a longer-term (though still temporary) court order issued after a full hearing to determine whether the risk of harm by the respondent persists. Unlike emergency orders, the respondent is given notice and the opportunity to attend the hearing.

At the hearing, both the petitioner and respondent may attend, testify, and present evidence or witnesses. The respondent has the right to be represented by an attorney (counsel), but in most ERPO states, they are responsible for obtaining and paying for their own attorney. If the order is appropriately served on the respondent, the hearing may proceed even if the respondent does not appear. The court considers evidence from both parties before deciding whether to issue the order.

If granted by a judge, the order continues the respondent's prohibition on purchasing or possessing firearms. Firearms removed during the emergency ERPO stage typically remain in law enforcement custody for the duration of the final order, which is often up to one year. Depending on state law, the respondent may also be required to surrender ammunition, firearm parts, firearm accessories, and/or licenses to carry or purchase firearms for the duration of the final ERPO.

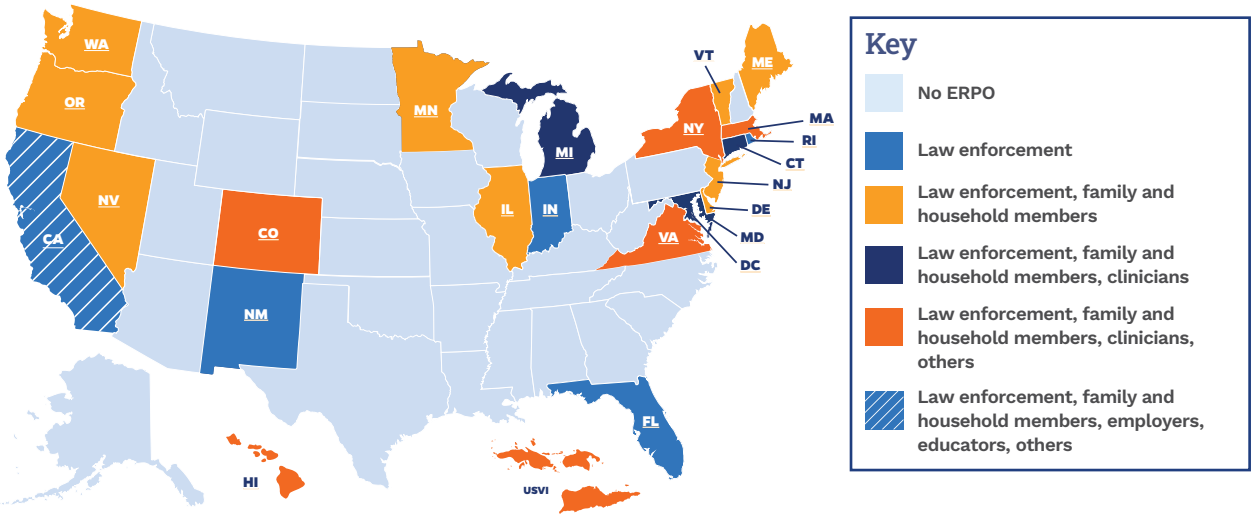
- **Enforcement and penalties:** Final ERPOs are civil orders and do not result in criminal charges. However, violations of the order may lead to criminal penalties.
- **Extension, renewal, and termination:**
    - Petitioners may request an extension or renewal before the order expires, with notice to the respondent and a scheduled hearing.
    - Respondents may request early termination of the order; these hearings follow a similar process. Check your state's court website for specific procedures.

Eligible Petitioners

Who may file (or "petition") for an ERPO varies by state and is defined by state law. All ERPO states authorize law enforcement to petition, and many also allow individuals to petition based on their relationship to the respondent, such as family or household members, clinicians, or school administrators. Clergy are not authorized to file in their official role as a faith leader but may be eligible to petition if they qualify under another category (e.g., as a family or household member).

The section below provides a breakdown of petitioner categories and where they are authorized to petition the court directly.

Map of Eligible Petitioners by State



Law enforcement:
Eligible in all states and U.S. territories with ERPO laws.

Family and household members: Eligible in 18 states, DC, and USVI and may include:

- Current or former spouses, partners, or dating partners
- Relatives (by blood, marriage, or adoption)
- Individuals who have a child in common
- Roommates or cohabitants
- Legal guardians

Clinicians and mental health providers:
Eligible in eight states, DC, and USVI (if they have examined the respondent) and may include:

- Physicians, nurses, psychologists, social workers, licensed therapists, and other providers as defined by state statute

School or university administrators:
Eligible in four states and USVI.

Attorneys:
Eligible in four states and may include:

- State, district, city, country, or commonwealth attorneys or attorneys general

Community members:
Eligible in two states and USVI and may include:

- Employers
- Coworkers or colleagues
- Educators, clinicians, or mental health providers with recent direct contact with the respondent or respondent's child (within the last six months)

This is a non-exhaustive list of petitioners. Eligibility requirements vary by state. For state-specific information on ERPO laws and eligible petitioners, visit ERPO users.

Overview of the ERPO Petitioning Process

ERPO procedures vary by state, including who may file, where to file, what evidence is required, how long orders last, and whether orders may be extended or terminated early. Clergy are typically not eligible to file ERPO petitions on behalf of a congregant, but they may help congregants or community members understand the process and connect with appropriate legal, court, or crisis-response resources.

For state-specific information, visit your state court website or the National ERPO Resource Center website.

Know Before You Go

- **Locating Court Forms:** ERPO petitions are typically filed in a local trial court, though court names and filing procedures vary by state. Forms may be available in paper copies at local courthouses or electronically through official state court websites.
- **Minor Respondents:** Some states have different filing procedures when the respondent is a minor.
- **Emergency or After-Hours Filing:** For urgent safety concerns, some jurisdictions allow emergency petitions, judicial review, and hearings to occur after hours, on weekends, or on holidays through an on-call judge, court commissioner, or law enforcement process. Availability varies by state and jurisdiction.
- **Assistance in Filing:** Court clerks can usually provide forms and basic filing information but generally cannot provide legal advice or tell petitioners what to write. Additional assistance may be available from attorneys, legal aid organizations, court navigators, victim advocates, or ERPO navigators.

ERPO Petition Requirements

Petitioners are asked to provide:

- Identifying information about the respondent and their relationship to the petitioner.
- Description of behaviors or circumstances indicating risk, along with supporting evidence. Examples may include:
  - Recent threats or acts of violence toward self or others.
  - Recent violations of domestic violence protection orders.
  - Patterns of violent threats or behaviors.
- Information about known access to firearms or other weapons (e.g., type, quantity, and location, if known).
- Affidavit describing behaviors or evidence indicating credible risk of harm and known firearm access or storage locations.
- Signed sworn statement affirming the information provided is true.

Understanding the ERPO Process

Filing the Petition
An eligible petitioner, such as law enforcement or a family member (depending on state law), files the ERPO petition with the court.
In some states, cases involving minors are processed in family or juvenile courts.

Emergency (Ex Parte/Temporary) ERPO
The court holds an emergency hearing to determine whether there is an immediate risk of harm.

If denied:
The process ends. Depending on the state, petitioners may appeal or refile if the petition is denied.

If granted:
1. Law enforcement serves the order.
2. Firearms are surrendered or removed, as required by state law.
3. The order is entered into background check systems.
4. A final ERPO hearing is scheduled.

Final ERPO
At the final hearing, both the petitioner and respondent may present evidence. The respondent may be represented by counsel. The court decides whether to grant or deny the order based on the state's legal standard. The hearing may proceed even if the respondent does not appear.

If denied:
Any surrendered firearms are returned according to state law and background check systems are updated.

If granted:
1. The respondent must comply with the order served by law enforcement.
2. Removed weapons are retained by law enforcement and the purchase prohibition remains in effect.
3. Courts may authorize law enforcement to remove any unrelinquished firearms, depending on state law.
4. The order is entered into background check systems.
5. The order remains in effect for the period set by the court (often up to one year).

Duration of Final Orders:
Most ERPOs expire after one year, although the duration varies by state law.

Renewal:
- The petitioner may request renewal before the order expires.
- Renewals follow a process similar to the final ERPO hearing.
- Depending on state law, either the petitioner or the respondent may have the burden of proof.

Early Termination:
- The respondent may request early termination, if permitted by state law.
- State law determines when and how often early termination may be requested.
- The court may hold a hearing to review the request. Depending on state law, the petitioner or the respondent may have the burden of proof to show that the order should be terminated.

When an ERPO Expires or Is Terminated:
- Any surrendered firearms must be returned to the respondent, according to state law.
- Background check systems must be updated to reflect that the respondent is no longer prohibited from purchasing firearms.

Navigating ERPOs: How Faith Leaders Can Support Their Communities

When Someone Is Considering an ERPO

A person considering an ERPO may feel overwhelmed, frightened, conflicted, or unsure about what to do. They may worry about damaging a relationship, escalating the situation, or making the wrong decision. In many states, only certain people are eligible to file an ERPO petition, so it is important to connect them with accurate information about the process in their jurisdiction.

Faith leaders can support them by:

- **Validating their concerns**
  Acknowledge that concerns about safety should be taken seriously.
- **Helping them explore next steps**
  Encourage them to learn more about the ERPO process and other available safety options. Offer to connect them with legal aid, court self-help resources, crisis services, domestic violence advocates, or ERPO navigators where available.
- **Offering spiritual and emotional support**
  Seeking an ERPO involving someone they care about can be painful and isolating. Whether or not they move forward, it is important to create space for expressing fear, grief, uncertainty, and concern for the relationship.
- **Encouraging safety planning**
  If there are immediate safety concerns, help them connect with appropriate crisis or emergency resources. Safety planning may include identifying safe places to go, trusted people to contact, ways to reduce access to lethal means, and support for children or other vulnerable people.

Suggested Language for What to Say When a Family Member or Loved One Is Considering Filing

> What you're describing sounds serious, and I'm glad you told me. Your concern matters. There may be options that can help create safety during this time, including a court process that can temporarily limit firearm access when there is a serious risk of harm. This is not about punishment—it is about creating space for safety and support. Would it be helpful to talk through who you can contact for accurate guidance?

Considerations When Only Law Enforcement Can Petition for an ERPO

In some states, only law enforcement can file for an ERPO. In these cases, clergy can help by connecting congregants and community members with law enforcement and supporting them through that process.

You may consider taking the following steps:

- → Help congregants and community members understand that law enforcement may be able to file an ERPO on their behalf.
- → Encourage the concerned individual to share specific concerns and observations with law enforcement.
- → Help identify an appropriate point of contact within the local police department when possible.
- → Be mindful of community context—if there is mistrust of law enforcement, help connect congregants and community members with trusted intermediaries or community organizations.

Helping Families Work With Law Enforcement

If a congregant or community member cannot file for an ERPO directly, they can share their concerns with law enforcement, who may assess the situation and determine whether to file for an ERPO.

Encourage concerned individuals to:

1. Document specific behaviors, statements, or incidents that gave rise to their concern or continue to raise concerns.
2. Contact their local police department (non-emergency line, unless there is immediate danger).
3. Ask about the department's ERPO process and whether they accept community referrals.
4. Follow up as needed.

A Spectrum of Intervention to Prevent Gun Violence

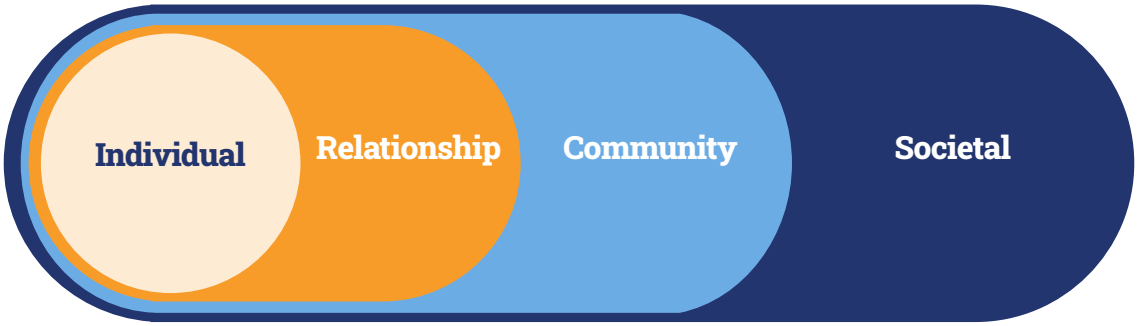
ERPOs are one tool within a broader spectrum of strategies to prevent gun violence. ERPOs specifically focus on temporarily removing firearms from an individual at risk of harming themselves or others and prohibiting them from purchasing new firearms for the duration of the order. In many states, and depending on the situation, ERPOs may be used alongside other civil protection orders that provide additional forms of legal relief.

While ERPOs may not be appropriate in every situation, or if you live in a state without an ERPO law, there are still meaningful steps you can take to support congregants and community members who are concerned that a loved one may be at risk of harm. Faith leaders are often among the first to recognize when someone is in crisis. By understanding ERPOs and other violence prevention tools, clergy can help guide and support congregants, community members, and families in taking steps that may prevent harm.

This section provides a general overview of the spectrum of possible interventions, including ERPOs and other gun violence prevention tools. The spectrum of available tools draws on the social ecological model, a public health framework that illustrates how individual, relational, and community factors influence risk and prevention, to show where these tools fit within the spectrum of interventions to help prevent gun violence.[7] This overview is a sample of available evidence-based interventions.

See Appendix B for additional information and resources.

Gun Violence Prevention in the Social Ecological Model



Individual

- Safe and secure storage practices
- Voluntary out-of-home firearm storage
- Voluntary do-not-sell lists

Relationship

- ERPO petitions by family and household members
- Out-of-home firearm storage by family or friends

Community

- Gun storage maps
- Gun shop projects
- Lethal means counseling
- Safety planning

Societal

- Firearm removal laws
- Firearm purchaser licensing laws
- Child access prevention laws

Easy access to firearms turns risky situations deadly

When a gun is used, nine out of 10 suicide attempts result in death.[7]

74% of school shooters under age 18 access a firearm from their own home or that of a relative or friend.[10]

An estimated 82% of adolescent firearm suicides involve a gun belonging to a family member.[9]

A woman is five times more likely to be murdered when her male abuser has access to a gun.[11]

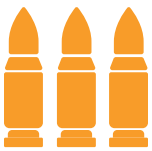
Best Practices for Safe and Secure Firearm Storage

Safe and secure firearm storage is a simple but powerful way to protect life and is one of the most effective ways to prevent gun violence. These practices are recommended for all households, regardless of whether there are immediate concerns about someone's well-being or safety.

For faith leaders, promoting these practices is a practical and non-stigmatizing way to support safety and well-being across congregations. As trusted leaders, clergy play an important role in encouraging safe storage as part of caring for individuals, families, and the broader community, helping to reduce risk before a crisis arises.

Safe and Secure Firearm Storage: A Baseline for Prevention

Store firearms unloaded & locked



Store & lock ammunition separately from firearms

Ensure the key or combination is inaccessible to anyone other than the authorized user

Temporarily remove firearms from your home if necessary

WHO

Only the owner or an authorized adult, such as someone legally permitted to possess a firearm, should be able to access any firearms or ammunition stored in the home or vehicle.

Only the owner or an authorized adult should have access to keys, lock combinations, and access codes.

Firearms, ammunition, and safes or secure storage devices (e.g., keys, combinations, codes) should be kept inaccessible to children, adolescents, and anyone at elevated risk of harming themselves or others.[11,12]

WHAT

Firearms should be stored unloaded and locked in a hard-sided container affixed to the home or vehicle.

Ammunition should be stored separately, ideally locked in a different safe or container.[12,13]

WHEN

Whenever not in use, firearms should be stored unloaded, locked, and separate from ammunition.[12,13]

WHY

Safe storage reduces the risk of firearm violence. Safe storage practices are associated with reductions in rates of suicide by firearm, firearm theft, unintentional shootings, and overall youth gun violence.[14,15] Over more than two decades, researchers have repeatedly found that safe storage policies are associated with reduced rates of suicide by firearm, including among children.[9,16]

Learn more about safe and secure gun storage.

SCAN THE QR CODE TO LEARN MORE.

Recognizing Warning Signs

Faith leaders can use the guidance in this section to recognize behaviors and patterns that may signal that someone needs additional support or interventions. It provides general examples of warning signs as well as resource and intervention options that may be appropriate, depending on the situation.

Immediate Risk

Clergy may encounter situations where there is an immediate and serious risk of harm.

Examples may include:

- A person is expressing intent to harm themselves or others right now.
- A weapon is present, being brandished, or being used to make threats.
- A person is in immediate physical danger, or a situation is rapidly escalating.

Call 911 or emergency services if there is an immediate threat to safety. Prioritize your own safety and the safety of others. Do not delay by trying other interventions when there is a risk of immediate harm. If it is safe to do so, remain present, keep the person engaged, and wait for emergency responders.

Elevated Risk

Clergy may encounter situations in which a congregant or community member exhibits behaviors that suggest an increased risk of harm to themselves or others. These may include expressions of hopelessness or suicidal thoughts, escalating anger or threats, significant emotional distress, substance misuse, or major life stressors such as loss, conflict, or isolation. These warning signs are often present in situations involving suicide, domestic violence, or other forms of interpersonal harm. When risk appears to be increasing, additional steps may be needed to reduce access to firearms and connect individuals to appropriate supports and reliefs.

Examples of Behaviors That May Indicate Elevated Risk of Harm to Self and/or Others

- Direct or indirect statements about suicide or harming others
- Recent acquisition of firearms or large amounts of ammunition
- Giving away valued possessions
- Misuse of alcohol and controlled substances
- Significant recent loss (e.g., job, relationship, death of a loved one) with escalating distress
- History of violence, threats, recent domestic violence, or protective orders
- Violations of protective orders or other court orders
- Reckless firearm use or brandishing of firearms
- Social withdrawal, hopelessness, or feeling trapped

Low Risk: Concern Without Imminent Risk

Clergy may encounter situations where a congregant or community member is struggling with depression, grief, job loss, relationship conflict, cognitive decline, or other challenges and has access to firearms but is not expressing thoughts of suicide or of harming others. While there may be no immediate risk, these situations still call for care and proactive support.

In these moments, faith leaders can encourage and assist with connection to mental health supports, health care providers, and other supportive services that can help individuals address the underlying challenges they are experiencing, as well as provide spiritual support.

See the Appendix for more information and resources.

In these low-risk situations, clergy may consider the following responses:

- Providing pastoral care and maintaining regular check-ins.
- Connecting individuals to faith-based or community support groups.
- Encouraging engagement with trusted family members or support networks.
- Encouraging connections to mental health or health care professionals (e.g., counselors or therapists).
- Promoting safe firearm storage practices in the home.
- If known, sharing information about where to find health care-based supports for reducing firearm risk, including:

Lethal Means Safety Counseling: Voluntary, patient-centered approach led by health care or mental health professionals to reduce access to lethal means—especially firearms—during periods of heightened risk.[26–29]

Safety Planning: Safety planning is an evidence-based and effective technique to reduce risk of violence.[30,31] Clinicians work with individuals (and families) to identify coping strategies, supportive contacts, and practical steps to stay safe during a crisis.

The following section outlines intervention options, including ERPOs and other tools, which may help reduce risk and prevent harm in these situations.

Voluntary Options for Temporary Firearm Storage

In some situations, voluntarily storing firearms with a legally authorized adult during periods of increased risk may be an appropriate option. This approach allows individuals and families to take proactive steps—without a court order—to create time and space between a person in crisis and firearms. When considering these options, it is critical to follow safe storage laws, adhere to best practices, and understand other applicable laws, such as those governing transfers to third parties and out-of-home storage. Note that these laws vary from state to state.

Voluntary Out-of-Home Storage

When someone is at increased risk of suicide, storing firearms outside the home can reduce risk.[17–19] Individuals may voluntarily transfer their firearms to a trusted, legally authorized person, licensed firearm dealer, or law enforcement agency for temporary storage. These laws vary by state, so ensure you understand your state's laws before considering taking someone else's firearms into your possession or suggesting that others do so.[19]

Voluntary Do-Not-Sell Lists

In Washington, Utah, and Virginia, individuals can voluntarily add themselves to a confidential list that prevents them from purchasing firearms. These self-imposed restrictions are reversible and may be considered during periods of suicide risk, often in consultation with a medical provider. The list of prohibited purchasers is checked during firearm background checks.[20] Availability and enrollment processes vary by state; see the resources in the Appendix for more information.

Gun Storage Maps

Gun storage maps can help individuals locate voluntary, temporary firearm out-of-home storage options (such as at participating gun stores or with some law enforcement agencies) during periods of heightened risk.[21,22] Some states provide their own maps, but for others, Pierce's Pledge may be a helpful resources for identifying nearby storage options.[23,24] Availability and requirements vary by state; see the Appendix B resources for more information.

Legal Interventions: ERPOs and Other Civil Orders

In situations involving elevated risk, a range of civil court orders may be available to provide protection. Mental health crises, domestic violence, and gun violence risks often overlap, and multiple legal interventions may apply. These orders vary by state in their names, duration, who may file, and the relief available, including whether firearm restrictions are included.

Clergy, congregants, and community members can find additional information on civil protective orders through state court websites, court self-help pages, and local legal aid or supportive service providers. See Appendix B for more resources related to civil protective orders.

Domestic Violence Protection Orders (DVPOs)

Also known as domestic violence restraining orders, DVPOs protect individuals from abuse by someone with whom they have a close relationship (e.g., spouse, partner, or family member). They may include no-contact orders, removal from a shared home, and, in some cases, firearm restrictions.

Using ERPOs with DVPOs

Survivor safety and autonomy should always guide decisions about whether to seek a court order and what type of order to pursue. When firearms are involved, filing an ERPO alongside a DVPO may help address the heightened danger firearms pose in domestic violence situations. An ERPO may allow for earlier firearm removal, including during emergency or temporary stages, whereas firearm restrictions under a DVPO may not take effect until a final order is issued.

In some states, law enforcement may file the ERPO petition (as opposed to DVPOs, where only the victim or survivor is eligible to petition) which can reduce the burden on survivors during a crisis.

Learn more about the similarities and differences between ERPOs and DVPOs here.[27]

Emergency Evaluation Petitions (EPs)

EPs allow individuals experiencing a mental health crisis and posing a danger to themselves or others to be evaluated by a health care professional and temporarily admitted for treatment. In some states, EPs may include temporary firearm restrictions.

Using ERPOs with Emergency Evaluation Petitions

EPs provide short-term intervention, and firearms may be returned once the individual is released from treatment. If risk of harm continues, an ERPO may help ensure firearms remain temporarily removed after discharge.

For more information, see the guide section When Only Law Enforcement Can File.

When to Consider an ERPO

When an ERPO May Be Appropriate	When an ERPO May NOT Be Appropriate
An ERPO may be appropriate if someone shows warning signs such as: • Recent threats or statements about harming themselves or others. • Recent acts of violence against themselves or others. • History of threatened or actual violence. • Reckless, threatening, or unsafe use of a firearm. • Recent acquisition of firearms or other weapons. • Issuance and/or violations of a domestic violence protection order or other type of protective order. • Escalating aggression, paranoia, or other alarming behavior. • Significant alcohol or substance misuse. • Recent violent misdemeanors or felonies, including domestic violence convictions. • Acts of cruelty toward animals.	**An ERPO may not be appropriate when:** • There is no evidence of imminent or significant risk of harm. • The only indicator is the acquisition of weapons. • The concern is based only on a mental health diagnosis or disability—such as depression, anxiety, or PTSD—without evidence of threatening behavior or credible risk of harm. *If someone is in immediate danger, call 911.*

Clergy Decision Guide for Responding with Care

Use this tool to help think through a situation involving a congregant or community member whose behaviors, circumstances, statements, or actions have raised concerns about their well-being or the safety of others.

What level of concern is present in this situation?

STEP 1

Is there an immediate and serious risk of harm to self or others?

NO

STEP 2

Is there an increased risk of harm to self or others?

NO

STEP 3

Is there emotional distress or another concern, without risk of harm to self or others?

YES

Call 911 or emergency services right away. Prioritize safety.

YES

Is there access to firearms which may elevate this risk?

YES

Take the concern seriously and help connect the individual or family to appropriate supportive services.

If firearms are accessible, encourage safety planning and measures to reduce risk while concerns are being addressed, including:

- Voluntary out-of-home storage
- Voluntary do-not-sell lists
- Secure firearm storage, as appropriate

Depending on the situation and state law, consider an ERPO or other civil protection options. This may include contacting law enforcement to share concerns, allowing them to assess the situation and determine whether to pursue an ERPO.

NO

YES

Address concerns promptly with care and attention. Provide pastoral care and guidance and assist the individual and/or family in connecting to appropriate support services.

Early intervention and support help the individual remain connected to their community and services, strengthening their social support network and mitigating factors that could cause the situation to worsen. If appropriate, encourage firearm risk-reduction measures, such as safe and secure firearm storage.

Talking About ERPOs in Faith Communities

In many faith communities, conversations about firearms can be deeply personal. For some congregants and community members, firearms may be connected to family history, cultural identity, personal safety, recreation, work, or deeply held beliefs about rights and responsibilities. For others, firearms may raise concerns about suicide, domestic violence, trauma, or community safety.

Because of this complexity, conversations about firearm safety practices, ERPOs, and other gun violence prevention tools should be approached with care. The goal is never to enter these discussions in a partisan matter or have them lead into a political debate. The goal is to help individuals, families, and communities respond with compassion and connect people to critical supports and resources when someone may be in danger.

Frame Conversations Around Shared Values

Most faith traditions have deeply rooted values that can guide conversations about ERPOs: protecting life, caring for the vulnerable, supporting families, accompanying people in crisis, and seeking peace within the community. Centering these conversations around shared values can reduce misunderstanding, preserve trust, and help congregants recognize that the focus is safety, care, and support.

Rather than presenting ERPOs as a position on firearms, clergy can frame ERPOs as one possible crisis response tool. In public health terms, ERPOs are a form of temporary risk reduction: they create time, space, and safety during a period when someone may be at elevated risk of harm.

Examples of messages that may be used or adapted to fit your own voice and community include:

"This is about helping keep someone safe during a moment of crisis."

"Our faith calls us to protect life and care for people when they are most vulnerable."

"When someone is at risk of harming themselves or others, families often need practical ways to reduce immediate danger."

"This is not about judging a person's character. It is about creating time and space for safety, support, and healing."

"Firearms can be especially dangerous in moments of acute crisis because the window for intervention may be very short. Temporary separation from firearms can help protect life while people get support."

"The goal is not punishment. The goal is safety, care, and connection to help."

Other plain language phrases for discussing ERPOs may include:

"Temporary firearm separation"

"Temporary firearm transfer or storage"

"Temporary limits on firearm access"

"A crisis safety tool"

"A court-directed process"

"A way to reduce immediate risk during a crisis"

When appropriate, clergy can also emphasize that ERPOs are time-limited, civil (not criminal) orders. They are intended to address a period of elevated risk, not to make a permanent judgment about a person and their ability to access firearms.

Clergy can also play an important role in helping individuals, families, congregants, and communities understand ERPOs and other intervention tools accurately. Misunderstandings or incomplete information can make already difficult conversations more challenging. The information throughout this guide, along with the resources in the Appendix, can help clergy build their own understanding and share reliable information with their communities.

Acknowledge Complexity

Discussions about firearms, crisis, and the risk of harm are rarely simple. These situations are often deeply personal and may require careful, thoughtful attention to everyone's safety and well-being.

Clergy can help by making room for this complexity while keeping the central pastoral concern in view: protecting life and supporting people in crisis. Treating people as being capable of holding multiple concerns at once builds trust and keeps the conversation open.

Connect ERPOs to the Broader Spectrum of Intervention Tools

ERPOs should not be presented as a complete solution. They are one possible tool within a broader response that may also include pastoral care, mental health support, family support, safety planning, substance use treatment, domestic violence services, peer support, and/or practical assistance such as housing, transportation, or food.

This broader framing is important. Public health approaches focus on reducing immediate risk while also addressing the underlying conditions that contribute to crisis. In a faith community, this can mean asking not only, "How do we reduce danger right now?" but also, "How do we help this person and family move toward safety, stability, dignity, and healing?"

Guiding Safe and Trustworthy Conversations

Know Your Confidentiality Obligations

Trust and confidentiality are central to the relationship between faith leaders and those they serve, and many states legally protect the confidentiality of private conversations between clergy and congregants. However, these protections have limits, and navigating them in crises requires care.

- Most states have mandatory reporting requirements for certain threats of harm; know your state's laws.
- The "duty to warn" may apply in some circumstances; consult a legal advisor about your specific obligations.
- Consider developing and making public a congregational policy on pastoral confidentiality and crisis response, reviewed by legal counsel.
- Your own religious tradition might also have special limitations on pastoral confidentiality. Consider consulting a local or regional religious authority in such cases for religion-specific advice.

Maintain Appropriate Boundaries

In crises, it can be easy to take on more than is appropriate for your role. Clear boundaries protect both you and the people you serve.

Do not attempt to diagnose anyone, assess lethality formally, or make clinical recommendations.

Be honest with congregants and community members about what you can and cannot do.

Build a referral network of trusted mental health, legal, and social service professionals before you need it.

Preserving Trust While Responding to Risk

In some situations, both the person seeking help and the person at the center of concern may be connected to the same faith community. This can create a sensitive pastoral or spiritual care challenge.

The following principles can help faith leaders respond with care, clarity, and attention to safety:

Be Clear About Your Role

Be honest about the role you are playing. If you have supported someone in seeking an ERPO or contacting the court or law enforcement, you may not be able to serve as a neutral support person for everyone involved.

When appropriate, help connect others involved with another trusted faith leader, chaplain, counselor, or spiritual care provider.

Protect Confidentiality With Safety in Mind

Information shared in spiritual or pastoral care may carry special confidentiality obligations. Those obligations can have limits when there is a serious risk of harm.

Faith leaders should understand their legal, ethical, and tradition-specific responsibilities related to confidentiality, mandated reporting, and the duty to warn. When unsure, consult legal counsel or an appropriate religious or organizational authority.

Keep the Focus on Safety and Care

Discuss ERPOs as temporary safety measures, not judgments about a person's character. A person at elevated risk of harm is still deserving of dignity, care, and support.

A helpful framing may be:

"The people who care about you are worried about your safety. This is about creating time and space for support, not punishment."

Support Ongoing Well-Being

People affected by ERPOs may need emotional support, mental health care, practical assistance, or help staying connected to community. One of the most important roles faith leaders can play is helping people remain connected to care, support, and hope during a difficult time.

Share Stories With Care and Permission

Stories can help people understand why temporary safety measures may matter during a crisis. When shared appropriately, they can make the issue feel less abstract and more connected to real experiences of care, concern, and protection.

Only share a story with the person's permission. Remove or change identifying details, avoid sharing private information, and take care not to present anyone in a way that causes shame or stigma. The goal is to highlight compassion, safety, and support—not to persuade through fear or judgment.

A Final Word: You Are Not Alone

Gun violence is a profound and complex challenge, touching families, congregations, and communities in painful and frightening ways. In these moments, clergy often serve as trusted companions: a steady presence in crisis, a source of prayer and care after loss, and a bridge to hope when the way forward feels unclear.

This work asks much of clergy. It can involve holding grief, fear, moral complexity, and urgent safety concerns all at once. The care clergy offer is deeply meaningful, and it is strengthened when clergy themselves are supported, accompanied, and cared for.

Keep in mind that ERPOs are one tool among many that may help protect people in moments of elevated risk of harm.

This guide is offered in support of the broader work clergy are already doing: caring for those in crisis, helping families seek support early, and building relationships that make communities more connected and prepared.

No one can prevent gun violence alone. But together—through trust, timely intervention, compassionate accompaniment, and shared commitment—we can help protect one another and build communities rooted in safety, dignity, and peace.

Thank you for your ongoing dedication to supporting your congregation, serving your community, and helping prevent gun violence.

Learn more about Extreme Risk Protection Orders (ERPOs) and the National ERPO Resource Center, projects of the Center for Gun Violence Solutions at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health.

This guide is intended for educational purposes only and does not constitute legal advice. ERPO laws and procedures vary by state and may change over time. Always consult current state law, local court guidance, and qualified legal counsel with situation-specific questions.

Appendix A

Glossary of Terms

Affidavit/Petition – A written statement confirmed by oath or affirmation and used as evidence in court.

Ex Parte – A temporary order issued without the respondent present.

Extreme Risk Protection Order (ERPO) – A civil court order temporarily restricting a person's access to firearms when they are deemed a risk to themselves or others.

Petitioner – The person requesting the ERPO.

Relief(s) – The specific actions ordered by the court (e.g., firearm removal).

Respondent – The person against whom the ERPO is filed.

Building Community Partnerships

Why Local Partnerships Matter

In many gun violence incidents, warning signs are present before harm occurs. Family members and close community members are often the first to notice changes in the behavior of a loved one, creating a critical opportunity to respond early and prevent harm before it happens.

Clergy are often among the first people individuals or families turn to in a crisis. Responding effectively—with tools like ERPOs or other options in the spectrum of interventions to prevent harm—ensures that congregants, families, and community members aren't alone in navigating crises or concerns regarding someone they care about. An effective response can improve timely intervention and outcomes.

By building relationships in advance with mental health providers, community organizations, and other faith leaders, clergy can play a key role in connecting people to the right supports at the right time, helping ensure responses are timely, well informed, and appropriate. Strong relationships within congregations and with trusted local partners can help create a safety net, making it easier to support those in crisis and connect them to care.

Identifying Trusted Partners and Resources

Experiences with law enforcement, courts, and public systems vary across individuals and communities. For some, involving these systems may raise concerns related to safety, past experiences, immigration status, or trust.

Faith and community leaders should keep safety at the center while being attentive to these realities. When possible, identify trusted resources before a crisis occurs, such as behavioral health crisis teams, victim advocates, legal aid organizations, domestic violence programs, community liaisons, or trusted public safety contacts.

Building these relationships in advance can help leaders respond with greater care and connect people to appropriate support during urgent situations.

Potential Community Partners

Consider building relationships with organizations that can provide training, referrals, consultation, or crisis support. These partnerships can help clergy avoid working in isolation and ensure that congregants receive support from people with the appropriate legal, clinical, cultural, or crisis-response expertise. Some examples include:

- Local mental health providers and crisis response teams.
- Domestic violence programs and victim services organizations.
- Community-based and hospital-based violence intervention programs.
- Local public health departments.
- Legal aid organizations or court-based self-help centers.
- Law enforcement community affairs or crisis intervention units.
- State or local gun violence prevention coalitions.
- Faith-based gun violence prevention networks.
- Other congregations or interfaith groups working on safety, mental health, or violence prevention.
- Local Survivor's Toolkit

Sustaining the Work

Sustaining this work may include pastoral supervision, spiritual direction, peer support, debriefing with trusted colleagues, denominational care resources, mental health support, and regular rhythms of rest, prayer, reflection, and renewal. Attending to one's own well-being is not separate from the work of ministry; it is part of what makes faithful, long-term service possible.

Self-Care for Clergy

Walking with families through firearm-related crises—and potentially through the loss of a congregant or community member to suicide or interpersonal violence—is traumatic. Care for yourself with the same seriousness and compassion you offer others:

- Maintain your own pastoral supervision or peer support structure.
- Debrief with a trusted colleague after difficult situations.
- Know the signs of secondary traumatic stress and vicarious trauma.
- Access your denomination's pastoral care resources and access mental health care for yourself.
- Participate in regular spiritual direction and mental health therapy.

Appendix B: Resources

Crisis and Mental Health Support

- **988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline**
  - Call or text 988 for free, confidential crisis support.
- **Crisis Text Line**
  - Text HOME to 741741 to connect with a trained crisis counselor.
- **National Alliance on Mental Illness**
- **SAMHSA National Helpline**
  - Call 1-800-662-4357 for confidential referrals to local mental health and substance use treatment services.
- **Additional tools for locating care include:**
  - SAMHSA Behavioral Health Treatment Services Locator
  - State and local mental health associations
  - United Way 211
- **Veterans Crisis Line**

Domestic Violence Resources

- **Domestic Violence Programs and Shelters**
- **National Center on Domestic Violence, Trauma, and Mental Health**
- **National Domestic Violence Hotline**
  - Call 1-800-799-7233 for confidential support and safety planning.
- **Additional resources include:**
  - Create Your Personal Safety Plan
  - Local Domestic Violence Service Providers
  - State Domestic Violence Coalitions
  - National Resource Center on Domestic Violence

Faith leaders may also consider building relationships with local domestic violence programs and law enforcement agencies to strengthen firearm removal practices and survivor safety protocols in domestic violence cases.

Extreme Risk Protection Orders (ERPOs)

- **National ERPO Resource Center (ERC)**
  - Provides free training, technical assistance, and educational materials related to Extreme Risk Protection Orders in all 22 states, DC, and the USVI with ERPO laws.
  - ERC Training and Technical Assistance Flyer
  - Extreme Risk Protection Orders & Domestic Violence Protection Orders: A Side-by-Side Comparison of ERPOs and DVPOs
  - Important Considerations for Law Enforcement in States with ERPO Laws
- **ERPO Factsheet** from the Johns Hopkins Center for Gun Violence Solutions
  State court websites also often provide ERPO petition forms, filing instructions, and self-help resources for individuals seeking information about the process.

Faith-Based Gun Violence Prevention

- **Faiths United to Prevent Gun Violence**
  - Provides faith-based advocacy opportunities and resources related to ERPO laws and gun violence prevention
- **Allied Against Hate: A Toolkit for Faith Communities**
- **Congregational Toolkit: Gun Violence Prevention**
- **Emergency Response Kit for Gun Violence Events**
  - *Presbyterian Peace Fellowship*
- **Conversation Guide: Guns and Responsibility**
  - *Living Room Conversations*
- **Faith Action Map**
  - *Faith Leaders for Ending Gun Violence*
- **Faith vs. Fear: A Faith Response to Gun Violence**
  - *United Church of Christ*
- **Gun Violence, Gospel Values: Mobilizing in Response to God's Call**
  - *Presbyterian Church USA*
- **Jewish Women International**
- **National Clergy Gun Violence Discussion Guide**
  - *Clergy for Safe Cities*
- **Protecting Houses of Worship**
  - *Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency*

- **Presbyterian Office of Public Witness (OPW)**
- **Resources for Leaders of Faith-Based Communities, Organizations, and Institutions**
  - *U.S. Department of Homeland Security*
- **Peaceful Families Project (PFP)**
  - Provides survivor-centered, trauma-informed, and evidence-based research, training, and resources to prevent domestic violence, with a focus on Muslim families across diverse cultural, ethnic, and racial communities.

Local gun violence prevention organizations and public health departments may also provide educational materials, training, and local resource guides.

Substance Use Resources

Substance use can significantly increase the risk of firearm injury and suicide. If someone shows signs of substance misuse, encourage them to seek support or treatment.

- **SAMHSA Substance Use Disorder Treatment Locator**
  - Connects individuals and families to local treatment options and support services.
- **SAMHSA Recovery Support Resources**

Suicide Prevention

- **Community Resources to Prevent Firearm Suicide**
  - *The Educational Fund to Stop Gun Violence*
- **From Crisis to Action: Public Health Recommendations for Firearm Suicide Prevention**
- **Means Matter Campaign by Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health**
  - **State-Level Lethal Means Safety Initiatives**
  - **2025 State Laws Regarding Temporary Firearm Transfers**
  - **Gun Shop Project**
- **Pierce's Pledge Gun Storage Map**

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