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Funding Security for Houses of Worship: A Step-by-Step Guide



In recent years, faith communities have faced a sharp rise in threats and attacks – incidents against religious institutions surged by 800% over the past six years. In response, government agencies and private philanthropies now offer grants to help churches, synagogues, mosques, and temples strengthen their security.

This guide explains how U.S. houses of worship can obtain funding for security needs through government programs (like the DHS/FEMA Nonprofit Security Grant Program) and private grants. We'll cover eligibility, what security upgrades are commonly funded, a step-by-step process to find and apply for grants, key grant programs and foundations, and tips to maximize your chances of success.

Eligibility of Faith-Based Organizations for Security Grants

Nonprofit Status: Generally, any bona fide house of worship or faith-based nonprofit can apply for security grants. Applicants are typically required to have 501(c)(3) tax-exempt status. (Most churches, synagogues, mosques, and temples qualify as nonprofit charitable organizations.) Grantmakers use this criterion to ensure funds go to organizations driven by community service, not profit.

Mission and Purpose: Religious activities do not disqualify an organization. U.S. law allows faith-based groups to compete on equal footing for secular grant programs, as long as funds are used for non-religious security purposes (more on allowable uses below). In practice, hundreds of congregations – from small rural churches to large urban synagogues – have received government security grants.

Risk and Vulnerability: Because these grants target security enhancement, applicants are expected to demonstrate a risk of violence or threats. Evidence of risk can include a recent incident (e.g. vandalism, arson, threats) or a professional vulnerability assessment documenting potential threats. For example, the DHS Nonprofit Security Grant Program (NSGP) specifically prioritizes nonprofits “at high risk of terrorist attack,” which has been interpreted to include houses of worship facing hate crimes or extremist threats. Successful applications usually include a brief history of any security incidents or concerns to justify the need.

Use of Funds: Grants must be used exclusively for security-related enhancements – not for general operations or religious programming. If your project includes both security and non-security components, only the security portions can be covered by grant funds. (We outline eligible and ineligible expenses in the next section.) Grant providers will also require assurance that you will follow all program rules, which for federal grants may include compliance with federal regulations (e.g. environmental and historic preservation standards).

Facility Ownership: Many programs require the applying organization to own or lease the facility that will be hardened. You may need to show proof of ownership or a long-term lease for your building/campus. Some grants allow funding for multiple sites (e.g. a main sanctuary and an off-site education building) in one application. Be prepared to list the addresses and uses of any site where improvements are planned.

Common Security Needs Eligible for Funding

Security grants can pay for a wide range of equipment and activities to protect your congregation. Allowable expenses typically include:

- **Surveillance Systems:** High-resolution security cameras, CCTV systems, video management software, and monitoring equipment. These help detect and record suspicious activity, acting as both a deterrent and an investigative tool.
- **Perimeter Enhancements:** Improved outdoor lighting, fencing, gates, bollards or barriers to prevent vehicle ramming, and alarm systems for doors and windows. For example, installing motion-activated lights and reinforced fencing can harden the building’s outer perimeter.
- **Access Control Systems:** Measures to secure entry points, such as keycard or keypad entry systems, electronic door locks, metal detectors, reinforced doors and windows, and intercom or doorbell cameras. Grants can also fund blast-proof doors or shatter-resistant window film to mitigate damage from attacks.
- **Security Personnel & Training:** Hiring licensed security guards or off-duty police for services and events (if allowed by the grant), or contracting with security firms. Many grants cover security training for staff/volunteers – e.g. active shooter response training, emergency first aid/trauma training, evacuation drills, and development of security plans.

- **Emergency Notification and Communications:** Some programs fund panic alarm buttons, public address systems, two-way radios, mass notification systems, and similar technology to improve response during a crisis.
- **Cybersecurity Enhancements:** Increasingly, grants may support cybersecurity tools to protect facilities (for example, network security for CCTV systems), though the focus is usually on physical security.

All funded improvements should directly relate to security and mitigating threats, not general facility upgrades. For instance, installing shatter-resistant glass, perimeter cameras, and an access control system would all be appropriate uses. On the other hand, merely remodeling an entryway or beautifying the property would not qualify unless tied to a security function.

Ineligible Expenses: Grant funds cannot be used for regular operating costs or non-security expenses. This means you generally *cannot* pay clergy or staff salaries, routine building maintenance, utilities, or purely religious materials with these grants. Most programs also prohibit using funds for weapons, firearms, or target practice. Other commonly excluded costs include general-purpose equipment (e.g. office computers, vehicles unrelated to security), construction that isn't security-focused, and any costs incurred before the grant is awarded. Be sure to read each grant's guidelines on unallowable costs – spending grant money on non-approved items can lead to penalties or a requirement to reimburse the funds.

Major Security Grant Programs and Funding Sources

Both **government programs** and **private foundations** offer grants to bolster security at houses of worship. Below is an overview of the primary funding sources:

1. Federal – DHS/FEMA Nonprofit Security Grant Program (NSGP): This is the flagship federal grant program for nonprofit security. NSGP provides funding to 501(c)(3) nonprofits (including faith-based organizations) that are at high risk of attack. Administered by FEMA, NSGP funds “target hardening” and physical security enhancements such as those listed above. Hundreds of churches, synagogues, mosques, and temples nationwide receive NSGP grants each year. The program has grown substantially – Congress increased NSGP funding from \$250 million in 2022 to \$454 million in 2024 to meet demand. Each state manages the application process for NSGP; you apply through your State Administrative Agency (often the state homeland security or emergency management department) rather than directly to FEMA. Awards typically range from \$50,000 up to \$150,000 per site, depending on the year and risk level (urban high-risk areas may receive larger grants). The NSGP application window usually opens in the spring (around March or April each year), so start preparing early. This program is competitive, but it's the most significant federal source of security funding for faith-based institutions.

2. State and Local Government Grants: Many states have created their own security grant initiatives for nonprofits and religious institutions, supplementing the federal NSGP. These programs vary by state in scope and size. For example:

- **California** offers a Nonprofit Security Grant Program with awards up to \$200,000 for nonprofits at risk due to ideology or beliefs.
- **Florida** allocates \$20 million annually in state funds to help nonprofits (including churches and temples) implement security measures against violent attacks and hate crimes.
- **New York** runs the *Securing Communities Against Hate Crimes* program, which has provided over \$131 million in grants in recent years to bolster security at faith-based nonprofits.
- **Pennsylvania** created a Nonprofit Security Grant Fund that has distributed \$25 million to synagogues, mosques, churches and other nonprofits since 2018.
- **Ohio, New Jersey, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Washington,** and other states have similar grant funds dedicated to safety at religious and communal sites. Eligibility and deadlines differ by state (some prioritize certain cities or high-risk areas), so check your state government’s website or grants office for details. Your state’s homeland security department or faith-based partnership office is a good starting point. Keep in mind these programs often have application cycles in summer or fall, offset from the federal NSGP timeline.

3. Private and Faith-Based Foundations: A number of charitable foundations provide grants to religious institutions for security or related needs. Some notable examples include the Lilly Endowment Inc., The Pew Charitable Trusts, and The Chatlos Foundation, all of which have histories of funding faith-based initiatives. These large foundations may not have a dedicated “church security grant” program, but they often fund projects to support congregational vitality, which can include safety improvements.

In addition, faith-community organizations themselves have established security grant funds. For instance, Jewish federations in several cities have raised private donations for synagogue security. In Los Angeles, a partnership between the Jewish Federation and Jewish Community Foundation (with support from the Tepper Foundation) awarded \$1.3 million in security grants to 55 local Jewish nonprofits in one year. Similarly, some denominations or church networks offer security grants or loans to their member congregations. Don’t overlook local community foundations and philanthropic individuals – after a high-profile incident, communities often rally resources to harden other vulnerable houses of worship.

4. Other Federal Programs: While DHS/FEMA’s NSGP is the main federal source, keep an eye on related grants. The Homeland Security Grant Program (HSGP) and Emergency Management Performance Grant, for example, fund state and local preparedness and could indirectly support faith-based safety initiatives. The Department of Justice and CISA also periodically offer funds or training specifically for target hardening, safety training, or hate crime prevention. Check resources like Grants.gov for any new grants tagged for “faith-based” or “nonprofit security.” The U.S. DHS Center for Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships is another resource that can point to current opportunities.

Step-by-Step: Finding and Applying for Security Grants

Securing a grant involves careful planning and adherence to each step of the process. Below is a step-by-step walkthrough for houses of worship seeking security funding:

1. Assess Your Security Needs and Vulnerabilities. Start by conducting a thorough security assessment of your facility and activities. Identify the key risks your house of worship faces – for example, is your building susceptible to break-ins? Have there been threats or hateful incidents in your community? Document any history of vandalism, suspicious activities, or threats. This needs assessment will clarify what security upgrades are most urgent (cameras, locks, training, etc.) and will serve as critical evidence in your grant application. Consider requesting a free vulnerability assessment from local law enforcement or using guides from the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) to evaluate your risks. The end result should be a written summary of your security gaps and the solutions you propose to address them.

2. Research Available Grant Opportunities. With your needs in mind, search for grant programs that fit your organization. Look at federal programs (like NSGP) and see if you meet their criteria. Then check for state or local grants in your area – many states post “nonprofit security grant” information on official sites (often under homeland security or emergency services departments). Also explore private grants: use online tools such as Grants.gov (for federal listings) or nonprofit grant directories (e.g. the National Council of Nonprofits’ grant tool) to find relevant opportunities. Websites like GrantWatch.com list grants by category and often include faith-based security grants. Networking can help too – reach out to your state faith-based partnership office or other religious leaders to learn about any community foundations or denominational funds that might assist with security. Create a list of grants you plan to pursue, noting key details like eligibility, application deadlines, typical award amounts, and required application components.

3. Confirm Your Eligibility for Each Grant. For each program identified, carefully review the eligibility rules and funding priorities. Make sure your house of worship qualifies before investing time in the application. Key checkpoints include confirming your nonprofit/tax-exempt status, location (some state grants require you to be in that state or in certain counties), and risk level alignment. If a grant is geared toward organizations with a history of hate crimes and you fortunately have no such history, your application may be less competitive – you might pursue a different funding source. It’s also wise to verify any technical prerequisites: for federal grants you’ll need to register your organization on SAM.gov for a Unique Entity ID, and possibly on Grants.gov. Tip: If any eligibility criteria are unclear, contact the grant administrator for clarification – most programs have an email or phone hotline for questions. It’s better to get guidance than to be disqualified on a technicality.

4. Gather Required Documentation. Grant applications will ask for various supporting documents to prove your eligibility and bolster your case. Start compiling these early. Commonly required documents include: proof of 501(c)(3) status (IRS determination letter), your organization’s current operating budget and possibly recent financial statements or an audit report, a list of your board of directors or trustees, and a detailed vulnerability assessment or security plan. If you have incident reports (police reports of vandalism, etc.), you may include those as evidence of threat. You’ll also need quotes or cost estimates for the security

improvements you propose – for example, get written quotes from security vendors for the cameras or alarm systems you plan to install. Having itemized cost estimates lends credibility and will be required for budgeting. Create a checklist of all documents/forms required by the grant guidelines and systematically assemble them. Missing documents can delay or derail your application.

5. Write a Strong Grant Proposal. This is the heart of your application – the narrative and forms where you explain *what* you’re asking for and *why*. Follow the application form or Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO) instructions precisely. Typically, you will need to provide: a summary of your organization’s mission and community role, a description of the security risks or threats you face, and a detailed proposal of the security enhancements you will implement with the grant. Be explicit about how each requested item or activity will mitigate a specific vulnerability. For example, instead of saying “we want funding for cameras,” explain “our exterior has several blind spots, so we will install 6 high-definition cameras covering entry doors and the parking lot to deter vandalism and provide evidence, as we experienced two vandalism incidents last year.” Include your earlier risk assessment findings to justify each component of your request. Also outline any training or policies that will accompany the equipment (grants like to see a holistic approach). A complete proposal will also have a budget section – list the cost of each item or activity and ensure it matches any quotes you obtained. Many grants require a timeline for implementation; propose a reasonable timeline for purchasing and installing the equipment or conducting training (usually grant funds must be spent within 12–36 months). Write in a clear, professional tone, and have someone not involved in the project read your draft to make sure it’s understandable. Remember, grant reviewers may read dozens of applications – make yours concise, evidence-based, and aligned with the program’s goals. Meticulously follow any format guidelines (page length, font size, etc.) noted in the RFP, as failing to do so can get an application rejected on technical grounds.

6. Submit the Application on Time and Through the Proper Channel. Once your application is complete and double-checked, follow the instructions to submit it. For NSGP and many government grants, you will submit to your State Administrative Agency (SAA) or via an online grants portal (each state has its own process) rather than directly to FEMA. State programs and foundations may have online forms or require physical mailed packets – adhere exactly to their submission procedure. Deadlines are absolute, so give yourself a cushion of a few days to account for any technical glitches or last-minute issues. It’s wise to submit *before* the deadline if possible. Verify that you received confirmation of submission. After submission, be prepared to respond promptly if the grantor requests any additional information or corrections. Then comes the hard part – waiting. It may take anywhere from a few weeks to 6+ months for decisions to be announced, depending on the program. Mark your calendar with the expected notification timeframe (often stated in the grant guidance) so you know when to follow up if needed.

7. Manage the Grant Award and Compliance. Congratulations, if you are awarded a grant – but now the real work begins. Houses of worship receiving security grants must carefully manage the funds and fulfill all grant requirements. First, review the award agreement and note all conditions: the performance period (how long you have to spend the money), reporting deadlines, and any procurement rules. Assign a responsible person (or team) to oversee grant compliance. Key post-award responsibilities include:

- **Documenting all expenditures and work completed.** Maintain detailed records (invoices, receipts, vendor contracts) for every purchase made with grant funds. You will likely need to submit progress reports or financial reports to the grantor showing how funds were used. Set up a dedicated folder (digital or physical) for grant documentation.
- **Meeting Implementation Deadlines.** If the grant timeline says, for example, security cameras must be installed within 12 months, make sure to schedule and complete the project on time. Many programs will require a final report upon completion of the project. Delays can jeopardize your funding, so communicate with the funder if issues arise.
- **Compliance with Regulations.** Especially for government grants, you must follow federal or state rules on how the money is spent. This can include using only approved contractors, adhering to equipment standards, and ensuring no grant funds mix into non-allowed areas. You may be subject to audits or site visits where officials verify the security upgrades were implemented as proposed. For example, FEMA's NSGP often requires an environmental/historic preservation review before certain projects (like installing fencing or cameras on a historic building) – be sure to follow any such procedures outlined in your award.
- **Sustainment and Training.** Plan for sustaining the improvements. The grant might pay for cameras, but your church will need to maintain them. Ensure staff/volunteers are trained on new equipment or protocols (often the grant-funded training can help with this). Cultivate a relationship with local law enforcement and let them know about your new security measures – they might offer additional support or include your site in their patrol routes.

By diligently managing the grant, you not only improve your current security but also set a positive track record that can help in seeking future grants. Many funders are willing to renew or offer additional support if they see funds put to good use with proper stewardship.

Tips to Strengthen Your Grant Application

Applying for grants is competitive – demand often exceeds supply, so it's crucial to make your application as strong as possible. Here are some best practices to improve your chances of success:

- **Select the Right Funding Opportunities:** Focus on grants that truly match your organization's profile and needs. Thoroughly research each grant's purpose and criteria before applying. For instance, if a grant is geared toward small rural churches and you are a large urban synagogue, your fit might not be ideal (and vice versa). Prioritize opportunities where you clearly meet the intent, which will make your application more compelling.
- **Conduct a Detailed Needs Assessment:** Don't skip the step of assessing and documenting your security needs. A well-founded application will reference a recent

risk assessment or security survey. If you can cite specific vulnerabilities (e.g. “Our education wing has no cameras and was broken into twice”) and tie them to the requested upgrades, reviewers will see that you have done your homework. Use data if available – number of incidents, response times, congregation size, etc. This shows the grantor that funding will address a genuine, evidenced problem.

- **Follow All Guidelines and Answer Every Question:** It sounds basic, but many applications fail because instructions weren’t followed. Carefully adhere to formatting and content requirements given by the grantor. Use any provided application checklist to ensure you haven’t missed an element. If a section asks for a specific detail (like a timeline or a specific risk narrative), make sure to include it. Grant reviewers often use a scoring rubric – missing a section could mean zero points for that category.
- **Include All Required and Supporting Documents:** A strong application package is more than just a written proposal. Provide all the attachments the funder asks for – IRS nonprofit letter, board list, budget, vendor quotes, proof of vulnerabilities, etc. (refer to the earlier documentation list). The more you can paint a complete picture of your organization’s need and capacity to use the funds properly, the better. If you already have a general security plan or emergency plan, consider including it or excerpts from it to show your proactive efforts.
- **Craft a Compelling Narrative:** Within the space allowed, tell the story of *why* your house of worship needs this grant. Emphasize the human element – the safety of your congregants, the anxiety caused by recent threats, and the inclusive community services you provide (schools, food pantries, interfaith events, etc., if relevant). While staying factual, ensure the reviewer comes away convinced that your congregants urgently need protection and that the requested upgrades will provide it. Be specific about outcomes: e.g., “Installing an access control system will allow us to lockdown the building during services, significantly reducing vulnerability to an intruder.” Avoid generic statements without connection to your site.
- **Leverage Available Help:** If you need assistance, seek it out. Many states offer technical assistance webinars or calls for NSGP applicants. Nonprofit associations or denominational bodies sometimes hold grant-writing workshops for faith-based groups. Don’t hesitate to reach out to the grant administrator with questions as you prepare the application – for example, to confirm if a particular expense is allowable. Utilizing these resources can give you insight into what reviewers are looking for and common pitfalls to avoid.

By following this guide – understanding your eligibility, targeting the right grants, and submitting a thorough, persuasive application – your house of worship will be well positioned to secure funding that strengthens its security. With improved cameras, locks, training, and other protective measures in place, you can provide a safer environment for worship and community life. Through careful preparation and partnership with grant programs, even congregations with limited budgets can obtain the resources to protect their members and sacred spaces.

Resources

Federal Nonprofit Security Grant Program (NSGP)

- FEMA Nonprofit Security Grant Program – <https://www.fema.gov/grants/preparedness/nonprofit-security>
- FEMA NSGP Application Checklist – https://www.fema.gov/sites/default/files/documents/fema_nsgp-application-checklist_2024.pdf
- FEMA NSGP Grant Writing Tips – https://www.fema.gov/sites/default/files/documents/fema_nsgp-grant-writing-tips_2024.pdf
- FEMA NSGP Investment Justification Template – https://www.fema.gov/sites/default/files/documents/fema_nsgp-investment-justification_2024.docx

State Security Grant Programs

- California State Nonprofit Security Grant Program (CSNSGP) – <https://www.caloes.ca.gov/office-of-grants-management/nonprofit-security-grant-program/>
- New York Securing Communities Against Hate Crimes (SCAHC) – <https://criminaljustice.ny.gov/ofpa/scahc.htm>
- Florida Nonprofit Security Grant Program – <https://www.floridadisaster.org/dem/nonprofit-security-grant-program/>
- Pennsylvania Nonprofit Security Grant Fund – <https://www.pccd.pa.gov/Funding/Pages/Nonprofit-Security-Grant-Program.aspx>
- New Jersey Nonprofit Security Grant Program – <https://www.njhomelandsecurity.gov/grants>
- Texas NSGP (federal program administered by Texas) – <https://egrants.gov.texas.gov/>

Grant Search Platforms

- Grants.gov – <https://www.grants.gov/>

- GrantWatch – <https://www.grantwatch.com/>
- GrantStation – <https://grantstation.com/>

Private & Faith-Based Foundations

- Lilly Endowment Inc. – <https://lillyendowment.org/>
- The Pew Charitable Trusts – <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/about/partner-with-pew>
- The Chatlos Foundation – <https://www.chatlos.org/>
- Secure Community Network (SCN) – <https://securecommunitynetwork.org/>