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Religions and Spirituality

East Brunswick: Local, State, and Federal Support for Increased Security Measures at Houses of Worship

Security Enhancements Placed at Local Synagogue before High Holidays



Amy Keller of the Jewish Federation in the Heart of New Jersey explains new safety measures in place at B'Nai Shalom.

TAPinto East Brunswick

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EAST BRUNSWICK, NJ - As the Jewish High Holy Days are about to arrive, concerns grow about the importance of security at places of worship around East Brunswick, and indeed across the nation, in light of multiple acts against religious communities. Recently, Temple B'Nai Shalom and the Vibrant Church, both located at 15 Fern Road in the township, benefited from grants to enhance security at the location.

Says the [New York/New Jersey Anti-Defamation League](#), "Reported antisemitic incidents in 2021 rose by 25% in New Jersey, reaching 370 total incidents – the highest number ever recorded by ADL in the state and the second-highest number recorded in any state across the country. These 370 incidents in New

Jersey constitute 14% of the total number of antisemitic incidents recorded across the United States last year." 31 acts of antisemitism were recorded in Middlesex County in 2021, the fourth-highest of the 21 counties in New Jersey to report incidents.

Amy Keller of [The Jewish Federation in the Heart of New Jersey](#) came to East Brunswick to explain the process of layering defenses "from the outside in." She works with many Houses of Worship through the Non-Profit Security Grant Program as part of her position on the New Jersey Office of Homeland Security and Preparedness Interfaith Advisory Council and the Faith-Based Information Sharing & Analysis Organization. The goal of these organizations is to prevent, prepare for, protect against, and respond to terrorist attacks. [The Non-Profit Security Grant Law](#) was passed by Governor Phil Murphy in 2019 in response to incidents of hate, bigotry and faith-based violence against nonprofit groups in New Jersey. The state law was co-sponsored by District 18 Assemblyman Robert Karabinchak who represents East Brunswick.

Many security upgrades at B'Nai Shalom are obvious - cement planters blocking entrances, gates, cameras, and lighting. Keller calls this approach "target hardening," a process making entrance difficult. She says that locations are gaining an "evolving security mindset" in which preparedness is key. "Perception is part of security," says Keller, asserting that a place that looks cared about and secure deters invasion.

Speaking at the event, East Brunswick Mayor Brad Cohen also talked about the changing "mindset." "I don't want to be the mayor who has to say, 'I never thought this could happen here.'" The mayor was joined by Councilwoman Sharon Sullivan, East Brunswick's Economic Development Officer Robert Zuckerman, and local scholar Dr. Alan Brodman.

Cohen joined Congresswoman Bonnie Watson Coleman (D-12), a member of the House Appropriations Committee, at the walk-through showing the new security enhancements. Cohen said, "It is unfortunate that security has become such a critical component of maintaining our houses of worship. On behalf of our East Brunswick community, I would like to thank Congresswoman Bonnie Watson Coleman for her efforts to bring the federal NSGP money to our communities of faith."

"The first clause of the First Amendment to the Constitution protects our legal right to freely practice our religious faith, but we must ensure members of the community can safely exercise that right," said Congresswoman Watson Coleman when visiting Temple B'Nai Shalom and the Vibrant Church.

"Investments like this one, made through the Nonprofit Security Grant Program,

can help ensure safety and peace of mind for people of faith in every community."

Inside B'Nai Shalom, it's another story. Security cameras, communications upgrades, automatic door locks and other steps are in place to secure the location and keep the congregants safe. (None can be described here as requested for safety reasons.) "There is always a safe way in and a safe way out," says Keller. Rabbi Eric Eisenkramer agrees with the "changing mindset" of his community as B'Nai Shalom approaches its 50th Anniversary in East Brunswick. There are silent alarms, lockdown buttons, a safe room, and immediate connections to the East Brunswick Police Department.

Chief Frank LoSacco of the EBPD told *TAPinto East Brunswick* that there is an ongoing conversation with faith-based organizations in the township. He affirmed "continual interactions" with local clergy, who have been directed to security trainings delivered by private, county, and state organizations. Eisenkramer took a moment to recognize the "strong relationship" and "direct access" between the religious communities in East Brunswick and the EBPD. Keller noted that Law Enforcement organizations have been provided with guidelines for important dates and traditions in a variety of religious traditions, in an effort to protect religious practice and to increase safety.

[The Vibrant Church](#), based at the Fern Road location for worship since June 2022, is a Christian community that focuses on community service and social change. "Though we've lived here since 1999, we can hardly explain the joy that filled our hearts on June 5th, at our East Brunswick launch of the Vibrant Church on 15 Fern Road, where we share property with Temple B'nai Shalom. Today, we had the honor of participating in an Interfaith Security Discussion with Congresswoman Bonnie Watson Coleman, Mayor Brad Cohen, Rabbi Eric Eisenkramer, and the Jewish Federation. With so many incidents of attacks on various religious groups, it was reassuring to learn about the security measures that are in place to protect communities of faith. We are so thankful for this endeavor and all who are committed to keeping our parishioners safe," said Pastors Kevin & Crystal Pleasant of East Brunswick's Vibrant Church in a statement to *TAPinto East Brunswick*.

"As security needs grow for faith-based and other vulnerable organizations, Jewish Federation is committed to supporting elected leaders in realizing the full potential and impact of the NSGP," said Dan Rozett, Jewish Federation's Manager, Jewish Community Relations Council (JCRC). Along with Federation's Director of Security Initiatives, Amy Keller, Rozett and Susan Antman, the organization's Executive Director, co-led the tour with Bernard Zitomer, Temple B'nai Shalom security chair.

When all the recognition dies down, though, security may come down to the devotion and attention of Bernie Zitomer, whose eyes never leave the flame, and whose commitment is deep and wide to the facility that houses his tradition.