

# Nonprofits Seek Security Amid Threats

After activist Charlie Kirk's killing, organizations are assessing their risks and taking steps to protect staff, buildings, and events.

By BEN GOSE



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**Nonprofit leaders who worked in relative anonymity in the past now increasingly worry about being targeted.**

**T**HE KILLING OF Charlie Kirk is only the latest in a rash of violence involving the nonprofit sector that has charities reconsidering their procedures and spending on security for events and leaders.

The country's deep divisions are escalating risks throughout the nonprofit world, forcing a reappraisal among charity leaders who too often believe their good works might immunize their

organization from violence. Michael Masters, CEO of the Secure Community Network, which works with Jewish institutions, says for-profit companies, such as health-insurance or natural-gas companies, are quicker to acknowledge and prepare for the possibility that their opponents may respond with violence.

"It's often hard, I think, for executives or boards, when you're coming to it from that place of altruism, to realize that there are people in this world

who don't view it the same way," he says.

Any sense of comfort in the nonprofit world has fallen away. In May, two Israeli embassy staff

members were murdered outside an American Jewish Committee event by a man who yelled, "Free free Palestine." In June, 13 people were injured and an elderly woman died when a man firebombed a group of walkers seeking to bring attention to the Israeli hostages held in Gaza. The walk was part of the broader Bring Them Home Now effort.

Outdoor speeches, long a hallmark of free expression on college campuses, will likely never be the same following the murder of Kirk, co-founder of the nonprofit Turning Point USA. Ben Shapiro, a conservative and often controversial speaker on college campuses, said after the shooting that he would "never again do an outdoor event."

Spending on security is expected to skyrocket. Solidaire Network, which draws support from 450 individuals and foundations, created a "movement protection fund" in 2020 to help racial-justice organizations respond to physical, legal, and digital threats following the death of George Floyd. The fund has already spent \$7 million this year — far more than the \$4.5 million it spent in its first four years of existence.

"The political rhetoric of violence and retribution that comes from the White House has impacted us a lot," says Barni Qaasim, Solidaire's communications director.

## Worries About Personal Security

The administration's response to Kirk's murder adds to the risks for nonprofits and foundations. Both President Trump and Vice President Vance have vowed to crack down on nonprofits and foundations that they say bear responsibility for the shooting, including the Ford Foundation and Open Society Foundations.

The Ford Foundation has removed the names of its board members and employees from its website. The University of Michigan began providing 24/7 security for its regents this summer, following vandalism of some regents' homes by anti-Israel protesters.

After an employee at Solidaire was threatened online in a case in which the FBI got involved, the organization added a benefit for all employees: An online privacy firm protects their personal information from data brokers.

Jewish organizations have long dealt with security threats. After 11 people were murdered at a synagogue in Pittsburgh in 2018, the Jewish Federations of North America raised \$62 million in the LiveSecure campaign, primarily for security to protect buildings, camps, and spaces.

But Hal Lewis, an executive coach who works with many leaders of Jewish organizations, says

many of his clients fear for their personal safety as the war in Gaza continues.

Nonprofit leaders who worked in relative anonymity in the past now increasingly worry about being targeted. At the University of Rochester, the executive director of Hillel was among a group of faculty members targeted with Wild West-style "wanted" posters late last year that referenced the war in Gaza.

Lewis says he would like to see Jewish federations lead a fundraising drive similar to LiveSecure, but this time focused on personal security.

Officials at executive search firms, including Sara Garlick Lundberg of DHR Global, say concerns about security are not currently dissuading applicants from pursuing leadership positions. But some candidates and executives may be reluctant to talk about their fears. Lewis says several executives he works with are wary of discussing personal security with their boards, given the huge investment their organizations have already made in infrastructure security. "They don't want to appear whiny, timid, or afraid," Lewis says.

But unless applicants and current executives feel safe, he says, it could eventually become tougher to fill high-profile roles. "If this continues, it's only a matter of time," he says.

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## THE TOP LINE

- Spending on nonprofit security has been rising — and is expected to soar after recent events, like the Kirk shooting.
- Past spending on security often focused on buildings, camps, and space, but leaders have growing concerns about their personal safety.
- One reason charities are reluctant to bolster security is the sometimes significant costs involved.

## There can be a culture clash between nonprofit workers and the former law enforcement agents who often staff security firms.

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Public sentiment around political speech and violence is also concerning. A study by the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression found that a third of students believe there are times when violence is an acceptable strategy for stopping a public speaker, at least in rare cases.

### Culture Fit and Cost

One reason charities may hesitate to bolster security is a culture clash with the former police officers and FBI agents who often staff for-profit security firms. Roy Speckhardt, cofounder of the Nonprofit Security Project, a new nonprofit that focuses on security for charities, says he was motivated to start the organization after a bad experience with a for-profit firm at his former employer, the American Humanist Association.

The AHA, an atheist organization, faced threats following lawsuits it filed regarding separation of church and state. The for-profit firm that came in to help jumped into a discussion about active

shooters too quickly, spooking employees, and lacked sensitivity on diversity, equity, and inclusion issues, Speckhardt says.

“It made me think this was a good idea and that we could fill a missing niche,” Speckhardt says. “We speak the language of nonprofits.”

Another reason charities are reluctant to bolster security is the cost. But foundations are beginning to recognize the risks and put more funds into security through efforts like Solidaire’s movement-protection fund. Federal and state programs are also available to charities and houses of worship.

The federal government’s Nonprofit Security Grant Program is slated to spend nearly \$275 million this year for measures such as cameras, bulletproof glass, and guards. Nearly two dozen states also have funds, according to Masters. California doubled its spending this year, to \$76 million, to help nonprofits and faith-based organizations with security.

Fred Burton, a long-time security expert now at Ontic, a for-profit firm with several large nonprofit clients, says the company helps its clients identify possible threats in dark corners of the internet. “It really is a full-time job to stay ahead of the threat actors.” ■

## How to Reduce Risk at Nonprofit Events

The recent string of violence involving the nonprofit world, including the murder of Charlie Kirk, the founder of Turning Point USA, has charity leaders scrambling for security solutions. Here are some steps to help make sure your nonprofit event is safe.

### Acknowledge the need for security.

“Charities should be open to the idea that they need to invest in and implement security solutions,” says Roy Speckhardt, cofounder of the Nonprofit Security Project. “It should be obvious, but it’s not so obvious in the nonprofit community.”

### Use free checklists.

Many security organizations offer free checklists for holding outdoor events, like the Outdoor Services and Events Checklist designed by the Security Community Network for Jewish holiday celebrations.

### Invest in a threat assessment.

A private security firm can conduct “adverse intelligence” to identify people or groups that may be looking to cause harm at your event.

“You have to understand who’s coming to your event and what

issues they’re dragging to that event,” says Fred Burton, a security expert at Ontic.

### Consider low-cost ways to limit the risk of violence.

One solution might be holding the event indoors and providing access only to vetted people with tickets, says Michael Masters, CEO of the Secure Community Network. “There are low-cost or no-cost ways that allow you to control access and don’t result in spending a disproportionate amount of money on security.”

### If you decide to hold an outside event involving a controversial speaker, learn from the past.

Both the assassination attempt on President Trump in Butler, Pa., and Charlie Kirk’s murder underscored the importance of eliminating access to high ground with a line of sight from a potential shooter, Burton says. That involves taking a close look at the facilities in advance and using uniformed or volunteer staff or drones to monitor anyone trying to enter areas who could pose a threat.

Says Burton: “There’s a statement that we talk about in our industry: It takes tragedy to force change.”