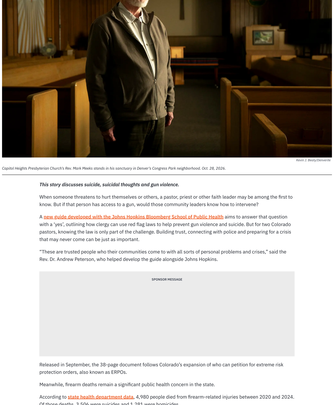
A new guide asks clergy to help prevent gun violence. Colorado pastors see challenges.

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By Hayden May · Oct. 29, 2024, 4:00 am



Capitol Heights Presbyterian Church's Rev. Mark Meeks stands in his sanctuary in Denver's Congress Park neighborhood. Oct. 28, 2024.

Kevin J. Beaty/Denverite

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This story discusses suicide, suicidal thoughts and gun violence.

When someone threatens to hurt themselves or others, a pastor, priest or other faith leader may be among the first to know. But if that person has access to a gun, would those community leaders know how to intervene?

A new guide developed with the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health aims to answer that question with a "yes", outlining how clergy can use red flag laws to help prevent gun violence and suicide. But for two Colorado pastors, knowing the law is only part of the challenge. Building trust, connecting with police and preparing for a crisis that may never come can be just as important.

"These are trusted people with their communities come to with all sorts of personal problems and crises," said the Rev. Dr. Andrew Peterson, who helped develop the guide alongside Johns Hopkins.

Released in September, the 38-page document follows Colorado's passage of who can petition for extreme risk protection orders, also known as ERPOs.

Meanwhile, firearm deaths remain a significant public health concern in the state.

According to state health department data, 4,980 people died from firearm-related injuries between 2020 and 2024. Of those deaths, 3,506 were suicides and 1,516 were homicides.

That means roughly 7 in 10 firearm deaths during that period were self-inflicted. A 2024 study of extreme risk protection orders in four states estimated that one suicide could be prevented for every 17 to 23 orders issued.

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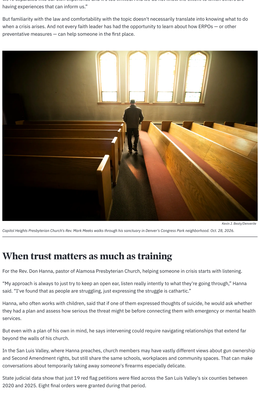
But not every person experiencing emotional distress needs a court order.

The guide for clergy distinguishes between immediate danger, elevated risk and situations where pastoral care or mental health services may be more appropriate.

"One of the key roles of our office is to educate about all of the different tools that are out there," said Molly Siegel, director of Colorado's Office of Gun Violence Prevention. "ERPOs are often a last resort, but there are other tools available like secure storage, so we want to make sure as we work with faith-based leaders that they have that understanding of that entire landscape to navigate."

Clergy can help families understand how to file ERPOs, connect them with other eligible petitioners or alert law enforcement when someone poses a danger. However, faith leaders are generally ineligible to file petitions themselves.

"In the states that have [red flag laws], our sense is that these clergy are being asked to perform this kind of public social work role, but asked to do it without the kind of support or training that you might ordinarily expect," Peterson said.



Kevin J. Beaty/Denverite

Capitol Heights Presbyterian Church's Rev. Mark Meeks holds an information packet about extreme risk protection orders that he received from Johns Hopkins University, in his office in Denver's Congress Park neighborhood. Oct. 28, 2024.

Building relationships before a crisis

In addition to understanding the resources made available to them by the state's red flag law, faith leaders must also navigate the nuances of personal relationships and the trust demanded of them.

"You want to be trustworthy, and that means obviously being as conversant as you can be about the nature of the endangerment and also being aware of resources in the community," said the Rev. Mark Meeks, minister at Capitol Heights Presbyterian Church in Denver.

According to state judicial data, between 2020 and 2025, family and household members filed roughly 36% of Colorado's 834 ERPO petitions.

Law enforcement accounted for more than 55%, while the remaining 8% included petitions from mental health and medical professionals, educators and district attorneys, along with 46 petitions for which a category wasn't identified.

The figures don't capture how many people may have first turned to a pastor or another trusted community member for help. But they do show that most petitions ultimately come through law enforcement.

For Siegel, the data points to an opportunity to reach more people who could help someone pursue an order.

"I see the data is really representing a continued focus on raising awareness specifically for those non-law enforcement groups and then also making sure that they have access to resources to help them," she said.

For Meeks, who is familiar with the guide but has never helped someone file an ERPO himself, one challenge is finding opportunities to learn from people who have navigated similar situations.

"One of my hopes is to foster clergy conversations where we talk to each other about our experience, about what we know and learn from each other, because I think the more we're conversant about the subject, the more we're self-empowering for capacity to respond when occasions may arise," he said.

Another goal he has is to establish stronger connections with law enforcement.

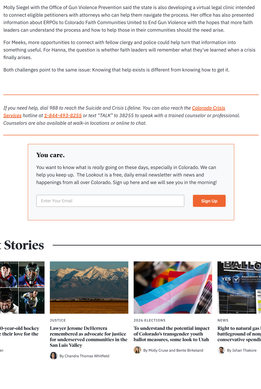
A few years ago, Meeks attended an interfaith gathering with Denver police leadership to discuss how potentially dangerous situations can escalate and what to do about it. He said interactions like that are beneficial but few and far between.

"We don't have enough of it, and I hope we can foster more," he said.

He's also looking for opportunities to bring the conversation surrounding gun safety and mental health into his own congregation.

"The subject needs to be integrated more into common life," he said. "One way to do that is to go through faith communities and be sure that they're conversant with the concerns. I think all too many of us live in silos in which we're separated into our own experience and it's too limited. And we do not know the extent to which others are having experiences that can inform us."

But familiarity with the law and comfortability with the topic doesn't necessarily translate into knowing what to do when a crisis arises. And not every faith leader has had the opportunity to learn about how ERPOs — or other preventative measures — can help someone in the first place.



Kevin J. Beaty/Denverite

Capitol Heights Presbyterian Church's Rev. Mark Meeks walks through his sanctuary in Denver's Congress Park neighborhood. Oct. 28, 2024.

When trust matters as much as training

For the Rev. Don Hanna, pastor of Alamosa Presbyterian Church, helping someone in crisis starts with listening.

"My approach is always to just try to keep an open ear, listen really intently to what they're going through," Hanna said. "I've found that as people are struggling, just expressing the struggle is cathartic."

Hanna, who often works with children, said that if one of them expressed thoughts of suicide, he would ask whether they had a plan and assess how serious the threat might be before connecting them with emergency or mental health services.

But even with a plan of his own in mind, he says intervening could require navigating relationships that extend far beyond the walls of his church.

In the San Luis Valley, where Hanna preaches, church members may have vastly different views about gun ownership and Second Amendment rights, but still share the same schools, workplaces and community spaces. That can make conversations about temporarily taking away someone's firearms especially delicate.

State judicial data shows that just 19 red flag petitions were filed across the San Luis Valley's six counties between 2020 and 2025. Eight final orders were granted during that period.

In Alamosa County, where Hanna serves as pastor, four petitions were filed over those six years, resulting in two final orders.

"I guess there's a balance there somewhere to make sure that people are getting the help that they need and that they're also feeling like they can trust coming into a clergy," he said. "So trying to make sure that they're feeling listened to and heard and also that we're keeping them safe."

And there's another practical concern: remembering what to do.

Hanna said that in his 13 years in Alamosa Presbyterian Church, he hasn't had a congregant disclose suicidal thoughts to him. If another 13 years pass before he encounters such a situation, he wonders whether he'd remember the information as a guide he read years earlier.

"If you don't use it all the time, are you going to remember?" he asked.

For Hanna, the challenge isn't simply getting information into the hands of clergy. It's making sure that information is useful when they need it.

Making the law easier to use

The challenges Meeks and Hanna describe are among those Colorado officials are trying to address through outreach and legal assistance.

The Colorado Attorney General's Office offers free online training for the public explaining how the law works and how eligible petitioners can seek an order.

Molly Siegel with the Office of Gun Violence Prevention said the state is also developing a virtual legal clinic intended to connect eligible petitioners with attorneys who can help them navigate the process. Her office has also presented information about ERPOs to Colorado Faith Communities United to End Gun Violence with the hopes that more faith leaders can understand the process and how to help those in their communities should the need arise.

For Meeks, more opportunities to connect with fellow clergy and police could help turn that information into something useful. For Hanna, the question is whether faith leaders will remember what they've learned when a crisis finally arises.

Both challenges point to the same issue: Knowing that help exists is different from knowing how to get it.

If you need help, dial 988 to reach the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline. You can also reach the Colorado Crisis Services hotline at 1-844-493-8255 or text "TALK" to 38255 to speak with a trained counselor or professional. Counselors are also available at walk-in locations or online to chat.

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