

Courthouse Physical Security – an overview

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Security should be a concern for all court staff – be alert, be vigilant. The court should put systems in place and train staff in security awareness to make courthouses and their surroundings secure for both staff and courthouse customers.

This is a short paper touching on the elements needed for physical security of a courthouse. This will be a very high level overview – each courthouse will need all or some of the items discussed – and perhaps other items not addressed in this paper. It will not touch on systems such as fire alarms or burglar type alarms.

One of the first things that should be put in place is to create a security committee – made up of managers, judges and personnel that have the authority and funding to make decisions. This committee should meet regularly to address security issues.

For physical security of a courthouse we will start from the perimeter and move inwards.

Exterior

Check the streets immediately surrounding the courthouse. Remove trash cans and other containers such as mail boxes that could be used to conceal explosive devices.

If there are trees and shrubbery around the courthouse they should undergo regular maintenance and trimming as necessary. Vegetation needs to be trimmed back and kept at 3 feet or below in height and any tree needs to have branches trimmed below 6 feet. This allows a clear line of sight throughout the vegetation and would discourage anyone attempting to use the vegetation as a place to conceal themselves or a device that could damage the building or harm personnel.

Bollards and/or ballistic planters could be used around the building to gain additional buffer space and help absorb blasts.

In parking structures and spaces do not identify by name or position designated parking spots; if possible bar entry to parking area to those who are not authorized. Badge entry systems and barriers are a start. If possible there should be a fence around the parking area.

Good exterior lighting is necessary to light all entrances and the entire exterior. This allows good viewing at night of areas close to the building where someone could conceal themselves. There should be security cameras – more on these later – with a view of the entire exterior.

The exterior of the courthouse and any parking areas should be monitored routinely by law enforcement or armed security guards.

Do not have offices or chambers on the first floor with windows that allow the occupants to be viewed. Use shades and/or tinting to preclude someone outside from seeing in easily. Depending on surrounding buildings this issue could apply to office windows on the higher levels. If there is extensive windowing on the first floor – such as around the entry way or lobby then blast resistant window covering should be considered.

If inmates are transported to and from the courthouse there should be a secure entrance such as a sally port so that officers can load and unload prisoners in a secure area – safe from external attack and the area would contain prisoners trying to escape.

There should be an armed security service providing security to the courthouse. At the public entrance the security staff should man a screening station with x-ray machines and metal detectors/magnetometers.

Now we get to the interior of the courthouse. There should be a secure divide between the public side and the staff and chambers side of the courthouse, with locked doors between the sides.

Courtrooms should have no external windows and if possible be located in the center of the interior of the building.

Judicial benches and any in-court clerk benches should have ballistic material to provide cover from gun shots. Seating arrangements for participants should ensure that the defendant is seated away from the jury box. Also if the courtroom has microphones they should either be secured to the furniture or ones without heavy bases that could be used as a weapon.

The courtroom public doors should be able to be remotely locked from the bench or at the least from the inside – so staff does not have to go outside the courtroom to secure the doors.

Electronic Security Systems

Secure access to the courthouse and internal areas should be controlled via a badging system. Staff should only have access to areas needed to do their job. All staff should wear identity badges.

Duress alarms should be located at every desk, public counter positions, screening area, in courtrooms at both the bench and any in-court clerk station, jury assembly and any relevant location. The alarm system should be constantly monitored, preferably from a control room in the building, and when pressed the alarm should notify monitors of the location of the alarm. It is usual that alarms are silent in the location they are activated. There should also be alarms located in garages or parking areas, and these might be locally heard when activated to possibly make the perpetrator move away. The duress system should be linked to the camera system so on alarm activation the view of the nearest camera to the alarm is activated on a main screen in the monitoring office.

A building wide notification system should also be used in conjunction with the duress system. This would notify staff that an alarm has been pushed in the building. The notification could be as simple as a strobe light being activated, or could be a sophisticated system that might pop up on PCs that gives staff

information on the alarm and what they should do. There could also be a voice annunciation or public address system. Another layer of notification is having a mass email and/or text message notification system that allows authorized staff to send out information.

There should be a security camera system, monitored by on site security staff. Cameras should cover both public and private areas of the building and a 360 degree external view. Special consideration should be taken of the clerk's counter – where the public directly interacts with court staff. Cameras in the courtroom should give a view of the entire courtroom to avoid blind spots and consideration should be made to have cameras even in Grand Jury rooms. Cameras with audio capability, that can be shut off as needed, should be considered to give first responders audio as well as video information. The camera system should also have recording capability to review video as needed. Cameras should be of a quality to allow facial recognition. Issues surrounding privacy and confidential proceedings should be addressed and policies published.

All of these systems should be tested on a periodic basis. This would allow for a level of confidence that the systems are working and also to train staff on the systems and what to do when they are activated.

If possible the court should bring in a security expert to conduct security awareness seminars/training all staff.

This was high level overview of security – systems should be put in place, however the most important aspect of security is to train all staff to be aware of their surroundings and what to do if a security incident occurs.

Acknowledgements:

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