

## **SAFETY STARTS AT HOME** by Mary Kay Mace

### **SESSION I**

Sandy Hook – Columbine – Virginia Tech – Northern Illinois University – the names have been embedded in our consciousness, places where innocent people were murdered in mass shootings. It has brought a wide-spread concern that no town and no person is safe. But the problem is not simply a matter of mass shootings by people with mental illness. Eighty-nine Americans are killed each and every day by guns. Fifty-five are suicides, thirty-one are murders, two are accidental, whether while hunting or in the home and one is from police intervention.<sup>1</sup> The number of gun deaths in this country since 1989 exceeds the number of U.S. soldiers killed in combat in all of our wars combined.<sup>2</sup>

Many of us have become fearful for our safety and that of our loved ones as a result of relentless news stories about unexpected spree shootings in the kinds of places we all frequent in our daily lives. It's horrifying to think that our children might not make it home from school or a movie or the mall. Perhaps the rest of the population is starting to understand what it's like to be a spouse, parent or child of a police officer or fire fighter, whose jobs are inherently dangerous. Our greatest hope is that our lives will be happy and productive; attaining those goals can be frustrated, though, as we have to admit that our personal safety is anything but guaranteed. So what can we do? We can start in the place where we have some control: our own homes.

Some people believe that arming themselves makes them safer. Is that is actually true? Here are some statistics that can help you to make an informed decision:

- In 2013 in the United States, 505 people died from an unintentional shooting; 124 of those were children or teens aged 19 or younger
- In 2013, 16,864 people were wounded in an unintentional shooting but survived; 3,127 of those were children or teens aged 19 or younger

Source: [CDC](#)<sup>3,4</sup>

- A gun in the home is 22 times more likely to be used in a completed suicide, 11 times more likely in an attempted suicide, 7 times more likely in a criminal assault or homicide, and 4 times more likely in an unintentional shooting death or injury than in a self-defense shooting
- Most unintentional shooting deaths occur in the home (65 percent), based on data from 16 states. The most common context of the death (30 percent) was playing with the gun.

Source: [USA Today](#)<sup>5</sup>

- It has been estimated at least 38 percent of American households have a gun. In homes with children younger than 18, 22 percent store the gun loaded, 32 percent unlocked, and 8 percent unlocked and loaded. The children in these homes know the gun is present, and many handle the gun in the absence of their parents.
- Children who have received gun safety training are just as likely to play with and fire a real gun as children not trained.

- In one study, 8-to-12-year-old boys were observed via one-way mirror as they played for 15 minutes in a waiting room with a disabled .38 caliber handgun concealed in a desk drawer. Seventy two percent discovered the gun, and 48 percent pulled the trigger; 90 percent of those who handled the gun and/or pulled the trigger had prior gun safety instruction.

Source: [St. Louis Post-Dispatch](#)<sup>6</sup>

### **Firearm Safety**

Whether you have guns in your home because you like hunting or target shooting or for personal protection, here are some commonsense suggestions that can decrease the likelihood of there being unintended shooting victims in our own homes or thefts of firearms. **It is especially crucial that you practice safe storage if you have children in your home!**

- Take courses on gun safety from certified instructors and receive hands on training with your firearm at the gun range.
- Purchase a gun safe in which to store your firearms. Never give children the combination or let them know where you keep the key.
- Safety experts recommend that recreational guns be stored in the safe *unloaded* and that ammunition be stored in a separate location.
- Use trigger or safety locks, which are available for most firearms.
- Always treat firearms as if they're loaded. Unintended shootings happen often when people assume that removing the clip makes the gun unloaded. There can be a bullet already chambered, though.
- Never, ever, point a firearm at a person you don't intend to kill. Horseplay with something other than a lethal weapon.
- Teach children to never touch a firearm without adult supervision.
- Impress upon children that guns are not toys. If they should ever happen upon any gun, teach them that they should not touch it and to immediately tell an adult where it is.
- Do not hesitate to ask the adults in other homes where your children might play if they have guns and if so, how they're secured. It may feel awkward but it isn't intrusive. You are your child's first line of defense. If your children spend any time in the homes of playmates or caregivers, you should know if they could be at heightened risk for accidental shootings. Keep your children out of those homes, even the homes of relatives, if guns are not securely stored or if you don't get an answer to your question about guns and how they're kept there.
- Perform regular maintenance/cleaning on firearms to keep them in proper operating condition. Make certain the weapon is unloaded first and that there isn't a bullet in the chamber.
- Report any lost or stolen firearms to the police immediately.
- Alcohol or drug use should never be combined with the use of firearms. Even someone who is just a "little buzzed" can experience cognitive impairment and lapses in judgment that can lead to tragedy.

**DISCUSSION:**

- 1. Guns can be used as weapons or as tools. What's the difference?*
- 2. If your child is invited to a friend's house, do you think you should ask if there are guns in the home and if they are secure from children?*

**REFLECTIONS FROM SCRIPTURE:**

Joshua 10: <sup>28</sup> Joshua took Makkedah on that day, and struck it and its king with the edge of the sword; he utterly destroyed every person in it; he left no one remaining. And he did to the king of Makkedah as he had done to the king of Jericho.

<sup>29</sup> Then Joshua passed on from Makkedah, and all Israel with him, to Libnah, and fought against Libnah. <sup>30</sup> The LORD gave it also and its king into the hand of Israel; and he struck it with the edge of the sword, and every person in it; he left no one remaining in it; and he did to its king as he had done to the king of Jericho.

<sup>31</sup> Next Joshua passed on from Libnah, and all Israel with him, to Lachish, and laid siege to it, and assaulted it. <sup>32</sup> The LORD gave Lachish into the hand of Israel, and he took it on the second day, and struck it with the edge of the sword, and every person in it, as he had done to Libnah.

<sup>33</sup> Then King Horam of Gezer came up to help Lachish; and Joshua struck him and his people, leaving him no survivors.

<sup>34</sup> From Lachish Joshua passed on with all Israel to Eglon; and they laid siege to it, and assaulted it; <sup>35</sup> and they took it that day, and struck it with the edge of the sword; and every person in it he utterly destroyed that day, as he had done to Lachish.

<sup>36</sup> Then Joshua went up with all Israel from Eglon to Hebron; they assaulted it, <sup>37</sup> and took it, and struck it with the edge of the sword, and its king and its towns, and every person in it; he left no one remaining, just as he had done to Eglon, and utterly destroyed it with every person in it.

<sup>38</sup> Then Joshua, with all Israel, turned back to Debir and assaulted it, <sup>39</sup> and he took it with its king and all its towns; they struck them with the edge of the sword, and utterly destroyed every person in it; he left no one remaining; just as he had done to Hebron, and, as he had done to Libnah and its king, so he did to Debir and its king.

<sup>40</sup> So Joshua defeated the whole land, the hill country and the Negeb and the lowland and the slopes, and all their kings; he left no one remaining, but utterly destroyed all that breathed, as the LORD God of Israel commanded. <sup>41</sup> And Joshua defeated them from Kadesh-barnea to Gaza, and all the country of Goshen, as far as Gibeon. <sup>42</sup> Joshua took all these kings and their land at one time, because the LORD God of Israel fought for Israel.”

Matthew 5: <sup>38</sup> “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ <sup>39</sup> But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right

cheek, turn the other also; <sup>40</sup> and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; <sup>41</sup> and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile.”

**DISCUSSION:**

1. *How do you reconcile these two passages of Scripture?*
2. *We are supposed to oppose evil; how can we do that without violence?*

**MORE THINGS TO DO:**

1. Contact your Congressional and State legislators to support legislation to improve the process of background checks and close loopholes that allow dangerous persons (felons, terrorists, people with mental illness) to purchase and possess firearms.
2. Ask for legislation to toughen penalties for “straw-purchases”, that is, buying guns for someone who could not pass a criminal background check.
3. Encourage Congress to support “safe-gun” technology, such as biometric locks that would keep someone else (a thief or child) from using your weapon.

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<sup>1</sup> “Key Gun Violence Statistics.” Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence, n.d. Web. 16 Sep 2015. <<http://www.bradiycampaign.org/key-gun-violence-statistics>>

<sup>2</sup> Levintova, Hannah. *More Americans Have Been Shot to Death in the Last 25 Years Than Have Died In Every War.* Mother Jones, 15 Sep 2015. Web. 16 Sep 2015. <<http://www.motherjones.com/mojo/2015/09/gun-violence-deaths-exceed-military-fatalities-us-wars>>

<sup>3</sup> “Non-fatal Injury Reports 2001 – 2013, National or Regional.” *Web-based Injury Statistics Query and Reporting System / CDC WISQARS.* Atlanta: National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, n.d. Web. 17 September 2015. <<http://www.cdc.gov/injury/wisqars/nonfatal.html>>

<sup>4</sup> “Fatal Injury Reports 1999 – 2013 (USA).” *Web-based Injury Statistics Query and Reporting System / CDC WISQARS.* Atlanta: National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, n.d. Web. 17 Sep 2015. <[http://www.cdc.gov/injury/wisqars/fatal\\_injury\\_reports.html](http://www.cdc.gov/injury/wisqars/fatal_injury_reports.html)>

<sup>5</sup> Racioppi, Dustin. *Epidemic: Guns Kill Twice as Many Kids As Cancer Does.* USA Today, 11 Apr 2013. Web. 23 Apr 2014. <<http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2013/04/11/guns-child-deaths-more-than-cancer/2073259/>>

<sup>6</sup> Kennedy, Robert M., David M. Jaffe, and Martin S. Keller. “Gun Violence Is a Pediatric Public Health Crisis : Stltoday.” *Stltoday.com.* N.p., 19 Feb. 2013. Web. 23 Apr 2014. <[http://www.stltoday.com/news/opinion/columns/gun-violence-is-a-pediatric-public-health-crisis/article\\_89b6fee9-f35f-560a-9111-fc16607fb11f.html](http://www.stltoday.com/news/opinion/columns/gun-violence-is-a-pediatric-public-health-crisis/article_89b6fee9-f35f-560a-9111-fc16607fb11f.html)>.

## SESSION II

In the previous class session we discussed the widespread problem of deaths by gunfire in America, and looked at some of the ways in which the home might be made safer. In this class session we want to consider the problems of domestic violence and child abuse.

### **Dysfunctional Homes**

As unpleasant a topic it may be, not everyone enjoys a safe environment in his or her own home. Domestic violence is a hidden epidemic; its victims are often ashamed and hide what's happening to them. But most pastors have experienced the issue of having a battered spouse come for counseling, even from the so-called "best families". Even church people sometimes have violence enter their family circle.

Child abuse is more widely recognized due to laws that require people in certain professions, such as doctors, educators and clergy, to report any suspected abuse, but it is still an insidious problem that affects far too many innocents.

Firearms in households with these problems introduce a more lethal component to a situation that's already bad. For instance, women are 500% more likely to be murdered by domestic abusers when there are guns in the home.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, 57% of all mass shootings are related to domestic or family violence.<sup>2</sup>

Please be aware and if you do suspect abuse, make your concerns known to the appropriate authorities. Below are some resources where you can find help seven days a week, 24 hours a day:

- National Domestic Violence Hotline: 1-800-799-7233 or [www.thehotline.org](http://www.thehotline.org)
- National Child Abuse Hotline: 1-800-4-A-CHILD (1-800-422-4453) or [www.childhelp.org](http://www.childhelp.org)

### **DISCUSSION:**

1. *Gossip is considered a sin in church circles; how, then, do we reconcile that reluctance to talk about others with the need to report suspected abuse?*
2. *Pastors are supposed to practice the "Seal of the Confessional." Even a court of law cannot force the pastor to divulge what has been told him or her in private. Should the pastor report cases of abuse?*
3. *Have you been in a situation in which you knew a friend or relative was being abused? What did you do?*

### **REFLECTIONS FROM SCRIPTURE:**

Luke 10: <sup>25</sup> Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus.<sup>[a]</sup> "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" <sup>26</sup> He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" <sup>27</sup> He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor

as yourself.”<sup>28</sup> And he said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.”

<sup>29</sup> But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”<sup>30</sup> Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead.<sup>31</sup> Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side.<sup>32</sup> So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.<sup>33</sup> But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity.<sup>34</sup> He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him.<sup>35</sup> The next day he took out two denarii,<sup>[b]</sup> gave them to the innkeeper, and said, ‘Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.’<sup>36</sup> Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?”<sup>37</sup> He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”

**DISCUSSION:**

- 1. What are some dangers of being a neighbor like the Good Samaritan?**
- 2. Do you know of someone who has been a Good Samaritan? What did they do?**

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<sup>1</sup> Gerney, Arkady and Parsons, Chelsea. *Nine Reasons Why Progress on Stronger Gun Laws is Within Reach*. Center For American Progress, 7 May 2013. Web. 23 Apr 2014. <<https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/civil-liberties/report/2013/05/07/62540/9-reasons-why-progress-on-stronger-gun-laws-is-within-reach/>>

<sup>2</sup> "Analysis of Recent Mass Shootings." *Mayors Against Illegal Guns*, n.d. Web. 30 Apr. 2015. <<http://everytown.org/article/analysis-of-mass-shootings/>>.

### SESSION III

In the first session, we discussed the issues of shootings in America. In the second, we talked about family dysfunction and violence at the hands of a loved one. In this session, we will address some of the problems of violence caused by mental illness.

Ever since the Texas Tower mass shootings in 1966, there have been a number of incidents in schools, malls and other settings in which one or two shooters randomly killed other people. In almost every case, there was evidence uncovered later that the shooter had been treated for one or more mental/emotional illnesses.

Moreover, the majority of shootings in America are classified as suicides, which in most cases come about because of severe depression or other problems considered to be emotional/mental illness. It is important, then, for us to consider and deal with violence caused by such dysfunction.

#### **Mental Illness**

Mental illness is a topic that the typical layperson finds difficult to comprehend. While treatment is best left to professionals, being aware of the signs that a loved one might be struggling with mental illness can help to avert unsafe situations. It's important to understand that the vast majority of mentally ill people are not violent and are, in fact, more prone to becoming victims of violence or being a danger to themselves.

While it is tempting to deny there is a problem, especially when the person involved is a loved one, please do not ignore such signs without getting assistance from a professional, such as a school counselor or a psychiatrist. If someone who has a lot of contact with your loved one, such as a teacher or a close friend, observes behavior that concerns them enough to mention it to you, please do not take offense or just hope that the problem goes away. There is no stigma to seeking help.

Be on the lookout for any change in personality or behavior that is atypical for your loved one. Not every such change means that mental illness is involved. According to the Mayo Clinic's website, some of these signs may be symptomatic of mental illness<sup>1</sup>:

- Prolonged periods of feeling sad or down
- Confused thinking or reduced ability to concentrate
- Excessive fears or worries
- Extreme mood changes of highs and lows
- Withdrawal from friends and activities
- Significant fatigue, low energy or problems sleeping
- Detachment from reality (delusions), paranoia or hallucinations
- Inability to cope with daily problems or stress
- Major changes in eating habits
- Excessive anger, hostility or violence
- Suicidal thinking

For more information, contact the National Alliance on Mental Illness at 1-800-950-NAMI (1-800-950-6264) or log on to [www.nami.org](http://www.nami.org).

**DISCUSSION:**

1. *Are we uncomfortable around mentally ill people?*
2. *What should the church do if someone comes into worship or a Sunday School class who is obviously mentally ill? Who should step in?*

**REFLECTIONS FROM SCRIPTURE:**

Mark 5: “They came to the other side of the sea, to the country of the Gerasenes.<sup>[a]</sup> <sup>2</sup> And when he had stepped out of the boat, immediately a man out of the tombs with an unclean spirit met him. <sup>3</sup> He lived among the tombs; and no one could restrain him any more, even with a chain; <sup>4</sup> for he had often been restrained with shackles and chains, but the chains he wrenched apart, and the shackles he broke in pieces; and no one had the strength to subdue him. <sup>5</sup> Night and day among the tombs and on the mountains he was always howling and bruising himself with stones. <sup>6</sup> When he saw Jesus from a distance, he ran and bowed down before him; <sup>7</sup> and he shouted at the top of his voice, “What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I adjure you by God, do not torment me.” <sup>8</sup> For he had said to him, “Come out of the man, you unclean spirit!” <sup>9</sup> Then Jesus<sup>[b]</sup> asked him, “What is your name?” He replied, “My name is Legion; for we are many.” <sup>10</sup> He begged him earnestly not to send them out of the country. <sup>11</sup> Now there on the hillside a great herd of swine was feeding; <sup>12</sup> and the unclean spirits<sup>[c]</sup> begged him, “Send us into the swine; let us enter them.” <sup>13</sup> So he gave them permission. And the unclean spirits came out and entered the swine; and the herd, numbering about two thousand, rushed down the steep bank into the sea, and were drowned in the sea.

<sup>14</sup>The swineherds ran off and told it in the city and in the country. Then people came to see what it was that had happened. <sup>15</sup> They came to Jesus and saw the demoniac sitting there, clothed and in his right mind, the very man who had had the legion; and they were afraid. <sup>16</sup> Those who had seen what had happened to the demoniac and to the swine reported it. <sup>17</sup> Then they began to beg Jesus<sup>[d]</sup> to leave their neighborhood.”

**DISCUSSION:**

1. *Why did the people beg Jesus to leave the district after he had healed the mentally ill man?*
2. *Can you think of instances in which we value economic considerations ahead of human need?*

**Suicide**

Viewed through the lens of reducing gun violence, it is important to address the topic of suicide a little more thoroughly than just touching upon its possibility when discussing mental illness. There are people who think that suicides should not be included in the statistics on gun violence, perhaps because they think those numbers represent people who “wanted to die” and would go ahead and do so by any available means. While that

is not necessarily true, would a Christian response to violence overlook the human suffering involved in suicide, whether leading up to it or its aftermath?

More than 60% of all gun deaths are intentional suicides.<sup>2</sup> Not only does suicide account for the majority of gun deaths, suicides are far more likely to be successful when the method used is a firearm.<sup>3</sup> Tellingly, ninety percent of people who make an unsuccessful attempt at suicide do not go on to die by their own hand.<sup>4</sup> This strongly suggests that removing the availability of a gun for those experiencing extreme emotional distress has the potential for saving lives.

Of course, we value all human life. It is desirable to prevent suicide regardless of the means and, as such, it is important to recognize some of the warning signs that someone might display prior to an attempt. Suicide *is* preventable.

Warning signs that behavior may be suicidal:

- Talking about wanting to die or to kill themselves
- Looking for a way to kill themselves, such as searching online or buying a gun
- Talking about feeling hopeless or having no reason to live
- Talking about feeling trapped or in unbearable pain
- Talking about being a burden to others
- Increasing the use of alcohol or drugs
- Acting anxious or agitated; behaving recklessly
- Sleeping too little or too much
- Withdrawing or isolating themselves
- Showing rage or talking about seeking revenge
- Displaying extreme mood swings
- Seeming suddenly calm or serene after having been distraught

*\*Also important to note is that the risk of suicide is greater if a behavior is new or has increased and if it seems related to a painful event, loss, or change.*

Source: [Suicide Prevention Lifeline](#)<sup>5</sup>

Getting started: Being familiar with the above warning signs and being prepared ahead of time will enable you to help a person in danger of self-injury. Find out in advance what resources are available in your community, such as hospitals or mental health facilities. Encourage anyone who seems to struggle with coping or challenging circumstances to seek help from a mental health professional and be ready to share the resources available to that person. Additionally, encourage the person to stay connected with family and friends who can provide ongoing support, but also make it clear that you care and would like to be one of those people providing support, if he or she will let you.

Take action: If you think someone has reached the point where he or she may be contemplating suicide, reach out to that person; don't wait for the person to come to you.

What to do if you think someone may be suicidal:

- Talk with the person and show you care. Listen without judging, regardless of your religious beliefs about suicide.
- Ask the person, “Are you thinking of ending your life” or “Are you considering killing yourself?” If the answer is “yes,” ask how he or she intends to accomplish this.
- If the person has a plan and access to lethal means, do not leave him or her alone. Contact a local mental health professional, a local hospital emergency department, or the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (8255). Calls to the Lifeline are routed 24 hours a day to the crisis center closest to the caller where staff are trained to work with people who are suicidal.
- Provide any relevant information you may have about the person to those who are managing the crisis.
- Keep in contact with the person after the crisis and provide ongoing care and support if he or she wants it. Draw on other leaders and volunteers in the community to provide support as appropriate.

Source: [Suicide Prevention Resource Center](#)<sup>6</sup>

It is important to remember to take it seriously if someone talks about killing him/herself or displays suicidal behavior. If it is possible to safely do so, remove lethal means, particularly firearms, from places to which the person has access. If the risk seems severe or an attempt imminent, take the person to the emergency room or call 911. If you feel the person may be capable of physically harming you in addition to him/herself, do not hesitate to call 911.

According to the director of the Suicide Prevention program at the Illinois Department of Public Health, churches are on the front line for suicide prevention. Churches can be instrumental in educating people by having suicide prevention literature available. Moreover, churches can provide a crucial sense of connection by forming support groups for those in primary caregiving roles for ill spouses or other family members or for people going through significant life changes, such as the death of a loved one, a recent divorce, the loss of job, etc.

#### **DISCUSSION:**

- 1. Do you think the Church can play a useful role in suicide prevention? What could your church do?**
- 2. Do we give the families of suicide victims the same kind of support while they're grieving that we do to families of people who have died in accidents or by illness? Why or why not?**

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<sup>1</sup> Mayo Clinic Staff. "Mental Illness." *Symptoms*. Mayo Clinic, n.d. Web. 23 Apr. 2014. <<http://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/mental-illness/basics/symptoms/con-20033813>>.

<sup>2</sup> "Statistics on Gun Deaths & Injuries." *Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence*. N.p., n.d. Web. 23 Apr. 2014. <[http://smartgunlaws.org/gun-deaths-and-injuries-statistics/#footnote\\_9\\_5975](http://smartgunlaws.org/gun-deaths-and-injuries-statistics/#footnote_9_5975)>.

<sup>3</sup> "Lethality of Suicide Method." *Means Matter*. Harvard School of Public Health, n.d. Web. 24 Apr. 2014. <<http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/means-matter/means-matter/case-fatality/>>.

<sup>4</sup> "Attempters' Longterm Survival." *Means Matter*. Harvard School of Public Health, n.d. Web. 24 Apr. 2014. <<http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/means-matter/means-matter/survival/>>.

<sup>5</sup> "Suicide Warning Signs." National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, n.d. Web. 23 Apr. 2014. <<http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org/learn/warningsigns.aspx>>.

<sup>6</sup> "The Role of Faith Community Leaders in Preventing Suicide." Suicide PreventionResource Center, n.d. Web. 23 Apr. 2014. <<http://www.sprc.org/sites/sprc.org/files/FaithCommunityLeaders.pdf>>.

**Conclusion**

While locking doors and windows and teaching children how to call 911 are home safety basics that most everyone knows, many people ignore other aspects that can have an impact on their feeling or actually being safe in their homes. Hopefully, you'll never need the information provided in the above sections, but if you do, there are people and organizations that stand ready to help.