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Soft Targets and the Nonprofit Security Grant Program

Nonprofit organizations, including religious institutions, community centers, charitable organizations, and advocacy groups, frequently operate with limited security resources. They may face heightened threats due to their visibility, mission, or symbolic significance. The facilities operated by these types of organization, which may be open to the public and therefore vulnerable to terrorism or targeted violence, are known as “soft targets” and have increasingly become a focus of U.S. homeland security policy. For instance, federal homeland security efforts at the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and the Department of Justice have expanded to include programs specifically designed to support the security needs of soft targets. One of the most prominent examples is the Nonprofit Security Grant Program (NSGP), which is administered by Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) as a part of the broader suite of homeland security and preparedness grants.

Since the program launched in 2005, the NSGP has grown from a relatively small and intermittently-funded grant program to one of the largest federal programs supporting security for nonprofit organizations. Annual appropriations for the NSGP increased by over 1,000% between FY2005 and FY2025. The program now represents a significant component of federal efforts to enhance physical security and incident preparedness for nonprofit organizations—particularly those considered at risk of terrorism or hate-motivated violence.

Background

The development of security programs such as the NSGP is closely tied to the expansion of federal homeland security policy after the September 11, 2001, attacks. Following those attacks, Congress significantly increased federal assistance to state and local governments to enhance preparedness for emergency response and counterterrorism capabilities. These assistance (grant) programs expanded over time to include funding for preparedness efforts designed to protect critical infrastructure, improve cybersecurity, and strengthen physical security at high-risk community institutions. The establishment of DHS in 2003, followed by the establishment of federal preparedness grant programs in 2007, provided a mechanism for distributing preparedness resources to communities across the United States.

Early homeland security policies focused primarily on protecting critical infrastructure such as port and transportation infrastructure, as well as utility systems and facilities. In recent years, policymakers have increasingly acknowledged that places of worship, community organizations, and cultural institutions may also be targeted by those with ideological motivations to plan and conduct

terrorist attacks. In 2005, congressional debates on homeland security funding began to emphasize the need for protection of soft targets and crowded places. As a result, federal funding increased for programs that help secure these sites.

The Nonprofit Security Grant Program

Within a broader suite of DHS preparedness grants, the NSGP serves a specific role in protecting nonprofit organizations exposed to the risks of a terrorist attack or extremist violence. Eligible applicants include State Administrative Agencies (SAAs), who pass through the funds to eligible sub-applicants, nonprofit organizations as described under section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code of 1986 (IRC) and exempt from tax under section 501(a) of such code. This includes 501(c)(3) entities designated as “private” (e.g., private institutions of higher learning), as private colleges and universities can also be designated as nonprofits under the IRC. (Public schools receive funding through an array of federal programs, but are not typically eligible for the NSGP.) The NSGP provides funding for activities such as facility hardening, access control systems, surveillance cameras, cybersecurity improvements, and security training. A specific list of eligible activities can be found in each year’s Notice of Funding Opportunity.

The NSGP emphasizes community-level collaboration. Nonprofit organizations often function as activity hubs and gathering spaces for community members, and perform functions that range from social services and disaster relief to education and religious services. The intent of the NSGP is not only to strengthen the security posture of nonprofit organizations, but also to integrate them into broader state and local collaborative preparedness efforts. In practice, this means nonprofit organizations coordinate with state homeland security offices, local emergency managers, and law enforcement agencies when planning security strategies and improvements. This collaborative model reflects the broader homeland security principle that national security is best achieved through cooperation across federal, state, local, and private-sector stakeholders.

NSGP Funding Levels, FY2005–FY2025

Funding levels for NSGP have grown significantly in recent years, tracking increased concern about targeted violence against community institutions. For example, the NSGP provided approximately \$274.5 million in funding in fiscal year (FY) 2025, with resources divided between organizations located in high-risk urban areas and those located elsewhere in the country. As noted, DHS typically administers these funds through SAAs, and these state-level agencies evaluate nonprofit applications and allocate grants based on state risk assessments and security needs.

Individual nonprofits may not directly apply for this grant. The purpose of this state-level, risk-based approach is to ensure that organizations facing the highest threat levels receive priority access to limited federal funding.

Table 1. FY2005–FY2025 NSGP Funding

Fiscal Year	Appropriation
2005	\$25 million
2006	— ^a
2007	\$24 million
2008	\$15 million
2009	\$15 million
2010	\$19 million
2011	\$19 million
2012	\$10 million
2013	—
2014	\$13 million
2015	—
2016	\$20 million
2017	\$25 million
2018	\$60 million
2019	\$60 million
2020	\$90 million
2021	\$180 million
2022	\$250 million
2023	\$305 million
2024	\$454 million ^b
2025	\$275 million

Source: CRS analysis of DHS annual and supplemental appropriations.

- a. A “—” denotes no funding provided for that fiscal year.
 b. \$210 million of this \$454 million was funded through P.L. 118-50.

For approximately 20 years, NSGP grant funding has aided thousands of nonprofits in enhancing their security and forging connections to state homeland security and law enforcement entities. However, due to increased threats and risks, demand for NSGP assistance has consistently exceeded available funding, with many nonprofits not receiving funding despite making applications. Recently, some Members of Congress have introduced a number of bills that bolster the NSGP and its funding. These bills include H.R. 4669, H.R. 6507, and numerous FY2026 DHS appropriations bills.

Additional DHS Preparedness Assistance

The NSGP is one component of a larger network of homeland security preparedness grants designed to enhance national resilience. The federal government administers numerous preparedness grant programs that collectively support prevention, protection, mitigation, response, and recovery activities across all levels of government. These additional programs include initiatives focused on urban security, emergency management, cybersecurity, and transportation infrastructure protection. While nonprofits may not be direct recipients of these funds, they may benefit from the enhanced capabilities of partner agencies. In FY2025, the total funding for these homeland security preparedness grants was approximately \$1.7 billion, demonstrating significant federal investment in national preparedness and community resilience. Funding may also be available for these additional preparedness grants from other agencies as well, including the Department of Justice.

Considerations for Congress

Policymakers continue to debate several important issues related to funding, oversight, and effectiveness of the NSGP. One major concern is to what extent Congress should increase funding levels to meet growing demand for nonprofit security assistance. Arguably, this demand has increased due to recent attacks on religious nonprofits such as the March 2026 attack on the Temple Israel Synagogue in Michigan, and the August 2025 shooting at the Church of the Annunciation in Minnesota. Additionally, policymakers face consideration of how to distribute funds across regions, types of communities, and organizations. These challenges highlight the broader tension between limited federal budgets and expanding homeland security concerns.

Conclusion

Nonprofit security has become an increasingly important component of the United States homeland security framework. DHS programs such as FEMA’s NSGP are examples of how federal policy has adapted to evolving threats against soft targets and community institutions. This preparedness grant program assists nonprofits in strengthening community resilience and reducing terrorism and targeted violence by:

- providing funding for security enhancements,
- promoting collaboration between nonprofit organizations and state, local, tribal and territorial governments; and
- integrating nonprofits into broader preparedness strategies.

Ongoing debates about funding levels, program design, and oversight suggest that nonprofit security is likely to remain an important policy issue as Congress continues to address emerging threats to domestic security.

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