

# **SAFE SPACES INITIATIVE**

## TOOLS FOR DEVELOPING HEALTHY COMMUNITIES





## ABOUT THE SAFE SPACES INITIATIVE

### Tools for Developing Healthy Communities

Healthy communities invite open expression and organically encourage the contribution of a plurality of ideas and feelings. There is equal opportunity for education, and there are standards for that education in the spirit of encouraging our children along a path that is beneficial to society and humanity at large.

Healthy communities also provide for those who are enduring hardships such as physical handicaps, trauma from abuse, poverty, mental illness or instability, and countless other categories of afflictions that no one can defeat on their own. A community's health should be gauged by the health of its least fortunate members and its ability to ensure equal opportunities and basic rights for all.

**This is the inspiration behind MPAC's Safe Spaces Initiative, a combination of community workshops and a toolkit (available at [mpac.org/safespaces](http://mpac.org/safespaces)) that creates a model to help our communities be more open and safe.** As an ethnically diverse American Muslim collective, we are confronted with an uncomfortable reality punctuated by marginalization and bigotry. Criminals who utilize pseudo-religious arguments to justify their crimes are a reality. Violent extremism is a reality.

After 9/11, there has been a national struggle with suspicion and distrust between each other as Americans. Countless proverbial lines drawn in the sand divide us. Although arduous, the national struggle to dissipate mistrust between American Muslims and American non-Muslims is of the utmost importance.

Extremists on the far-right have called for the culling of American Muslims as the cure to violent extremism. American Muslims are suspicious of how the rest

of America views Islam and are traumatized by the continuous dehumanization of their religion. This vicious cycle exacerbates tragedy into hysteria, making it difficult to build positive alliances that will serve the common good of all involved. Partnerships founded upon mutual trust between law enforcement and community are the most effective means to counter violence, in all of its forms.

## THE CHALLENGE

On April 15, 2013, the bombings in Boston sent shockwaves across the nation. The spotlight was on American Muslims once again. What is more disconcerting is that this atrocity was preventable. If Dzhokhar Tsarnaev had had access to professional help he may not have gone down the path he did.

The "P" in the PIE model is the most important aspect of the initiative, because its aim is to establish a supportive community that would provide that access. Prevention is best understood as a principle, not a "step" - the principle that when human beings have access to education, personal development and equal opportunity, all forms of violence and social ills naturally decrease. Prevention is like strengthening the immune system, preventing disease before it can take root.

What we currently know suggests that both of the Tsarnaev brothers had significant problems in their lives, but they did not have to go down the path they did. Had they had the right kind of outside intervention and assistance perhaps the horrific events could have been avoided. It is our hope that through this Initiative people who find themselves spiraling down toward a violent path will have access to the help or services that could save their lives.

# THE PIE MODEL

**MPAC's approach to tackling violent extremism is based on two premises:**

1. A person's path to violence is unique and involves many factors.
2. With proper community support, people can be prevented from going down a path of violence.

PIE is an acronym for Prevention, Intervention and Ejection. These describe the rudimentary pillars of the Safe Spaces Initiative.

## PREVENTION

Prevention focuses on education, civic engagement programs, and support groups to vent grievances about things like foreign policy, gender relations, and drug abuse. When people who may have gone down a path of violence have healthy alternatives, the path becomes less appealing.

## INTERVENTION

Intervention occurs when a person of concern exhibits behavior that is making others worry about him or her being a potential threat. The aim is to not have these cases end in arrest, but to intervene with the appropriate professional help that can derail the person from committing acts of violence. Our approach here is based on what was implemented in schools and universities nationwide in response to violent tragedies such as those at Columbine High School and Virginia Tech University.

## EJECTION

Ejection is always the last resort, and we aim to always avoid this step. Ejection means that there is no way to convince someone who you are sure is going to commit an act of violence to not go down that path. At this point, the primary concern becomes the safety of the community and congregation, and law enforcement should be notified. Please note procedures in the Safe Spaces toolkit or consult with us directly. This is not a step that should be taken alone.

## NEXT STEPS

More can be read about the PIE model in the Safe Spaces toolkit. The next step we want to take is to consult with you and bring workshops to your community. No one community or congregation is the same, and ultimately, whatever changes are made need to be conceived and implemented from within.

Honest and open discussions are the beginning of fostering safe spaces. We are eager to hear your feedback as we find a path to a safe society together. This can only happen with your active participation.

## COMMUNITY & LAW ENFORCEMENT

When law enforcement spearheaded the “hard on crime” approach in response to the growing issues with gang violence, they learned that it only exacerbated the issue. You cannot put fire out with fire. Law enforcement agencies value their community outreach initiatives because it is a much more effective method in the prevention of crime.

Law enforcement can only go so far to prevent violence. Imams and community leaders have the ability to address theological, social and familial issues more effectively than law enforcement can. Actively building a relationship with local law enforcement through frequent and open interaction is a priority of this Initiative.

When it comes to violent extremism in America, the onus is upon each of us to do something about it while respecting that we all have different roles to play. It is through the arts, sciences, entertainment and other cultural arenas that anti-Muslim bigotry will ultimately be eradicated from the public sphere. Muslims becoming an integral part of society is vital to achieve these ends.

We also face the challenges of sectarianism, alcohol and drug abuse, teen pregnancy, and so forth. Under such a complex web of pressures it is natural for people to isolate and divide, but we believe that the solution lies elsewhere.

*“And hold fast, all together, unto the bond with God, and do not draw apart from one another. And remember the blessings which God has bestowed upon you: how, when you were enemies, He brought your hearts together, so that through His blessing you became brethren; and [how, when] you were on the brink of a fiery abyss. He saved you from it. In this way God makes clear His messages unto you, so that you might find guidance.” (Quran 3:103)*

The most important takeaway is that there are always opportunities to protect or prevent our loved ones from going down a dangerous and destructive path. There is always something we can do - alternatives exist. We cover these alternatives and more, in detail, in the Safe Spaces toolkit and community workshops.

## AN EXAMPLE OF PARTNERSHIP

### MPAC & the LAPD

One of our founding principles is to use engagement to speak truth to power. MPAC has developed a mutually beneficial partnership with the LAPD. We advise and inform its understanding and actions toward Muslims and Islam, and it is an eager partner that collaborates with American Muslim communities. It is a far more effective strategy for law enforcement to partner with communities in response to crime and ensure their safety.

This model sets the precedent for an honest and constructive relationship with law enforcement. The development of honorable alliances contributes to a safe environment for all Americans. After all, in a democracy, when facing a crisis, people should be able to find solace in the protection of those who enforce the law. We are grateful to our friends at the LAPD for their support of this initiative.

## LET'S WORK TOGETHER

The Safe Spaces Initiative contributes to the development of independent American Muslim communities through consultancy and workshops. By encouraging American Muslim community leaders to embrace the tenets of leadership and prioritize alliance building and unity, the health and security of our communities are better ensured.

We want to collaborate with you in an enduring partnership to unite against a common challenge. The Safe Spaces toolkit provides background, analysis and tools for developing healthy communities. Healthy communities are the only true cure for extremism and violence in all its forms.

**Please call or email us to set up a workshop.**

LEARN MORE

[mpac.org/safespaces](http://mpac.org/safespaces)

[safespaces@mpac.org](mailto:safespaces@mpac.org)

Washington, DC  
202-547-7701

Los Angeles, CA  
323-258-6722

The Muslim Public Affairs Council improves public understanding and policies that impact Americans by engaging our government, media and communities.

