OPINION · PRIVATE SECURITY IN AMERICA

Certification should start at the front door

Security officers are the face of our profession. Their skills should be tested, kept current, and paid for by the people who depend on them.

The front line, by the numbers

1.3 million
Security officer jobs in the United States in 2025. The largest protective service occupation in the country.

$38,020
Median pay for security officers, May 2025. The median for all occupations was $50,980.

157,200
Openings projected each year for security officers and gambling surveillance officers, mostly to replace people who leave.

470
Workplace homicides recorded in 2024. Protective service workers accounted for 97 of them.

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Occupational Outlook Handbook (August 2026) and Census of Fatal Occupational Injuries (February 2026). Federal data uses the job title "security guards."

A state license is the floor

- There is no federal training standard for security officers
- Typical entry: a high school diploma, a background check, and about 8 hours of pre-assignment training
- Requirements swing from none at all to about 48 hours, depending on the state
- **It shows a person may work, not that they are ready for every post**

Certification builds the career

- Tested against a shared body of knowledge
- Earns continuing education units and must be renewed
- A clear ladder from officer to supervisor to leader
- **It gives clients and the public a standard they can check**

America already has the blueprint

The Security Officers and Patrol Services Competency Model, published by the U.S. Department of Labor and championed by the International Foundation for Protection Officers, is free to download and use.

Tier 6	Occupation-specific roles: screening, surveillance, close protection
Tier 5	Industry sectors: contract guarding, loss prevention, armored car, casino
Tier 4	Technical skills: access control, patrol, basic investigations, rule enforcement, de-escalation, emergency response, customer service
Tier 3	Workplace skills: teamwork, problem solving, personal health and safety
Tier 2	Academic skills: security fundamentals, communication, report writing
Tier 1	Personal effectiveness: integrity, professionalism, dependability, lifelong learning

A pathway, from first shift to leadership

1. **State license or registration**
   Required where the state regulates. The starting line, not the finish.
2. **Initial Security Officer Program**
   16 hours online, final exam, certificate of completion.
3. **Certified Protection Officer**
   64 hours, after 6 months of full-time experience. Renewed every 2 years.
4. **Certified in Security Supervision and Management**
   For supervisors and emerging leaders. Instructor credentials follow.

Before you hire a security company, ask:

1. What training do your officers have beyond the license?
2. Who pays for it, and is it on paid time?
3. What standard is that training measured against?
4. How do you keep their skills current?

Walter Chan, Certified Protection Professional. Volunteer Director, International Foundation for Protection Officers Canada. Written in a personal capacity. Sources are listed in the article.

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Certification Should Start at the Front Door

America counts about 1.3 million security officers, yet in much of the country we ask them to prove almost nothing. If our profession wants public trust, it has to invest where the public actually meets it.

By Walter Chan, Certified Protection Professional | October 2026

Think about the last time you dealt with private security. It probably was not a consultant or a security director. It was an officer: the person at the emergency room door at 2 a.m., the one who asked you to step back at a loading dock, the one who walked a nurse to her car at the end of a night shift.

To most Americans, that person is the security industry. Yet in much of the country, the only proof we ask of them is a state registration card. In some states, not even that.

In September, Eric Sean Clay, president of the International Association for Healthcare Security and Safety, published a column arguing that organizations should ask security consultants about their certifications before anything else. He is right. But the argument should not stop at the consultant's door. If certification matters for the people who write security plans, it matters at least as much for the people who carry them out, often alone, often at night, and often with no backup.

One note about where I sit. I write from Canada, where I am a volunteer director of this Foundation's Canadian division. The numbers below are American and federal, because the problem Eric described does not stop at a border.

The largest protective service workforce in the country

Security officers held about 1.3 million jobs in 2025, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, which counts 1,294,300 security guards and 1,304,000 in the combined group that also includes gambling surveillance officers. Most of them, 58 percent, work in investigation, guard and armored car services. Another 7 percent work in schools and colleges, and 6 percent in health care and social assistance.

A note on words. Federal data still files this work under the job title "security guards," so that phrase appears in the sources cited here. The Department of Labor competency model discussed below notes that agent, officer and guard are used interchangeably depending on location and law, and uses officer throughout. So do I.

This is the largest occupation in the protective service group. In May 2021, the last time the Bureau compared them directly, there were 1,057,100 security officers and 665,380 police and sheriff's patrol officers.

The turnover is as striking as the size. Employment is projected to grow 1 percent through 2035, yet the Bureau expects about 157,200 openings a year for security officers and gambling surveillance officers combined, mostly because people leave the work. The median wage for security officers was $38,020 in May 2025, against $50,980 for all occupations.

What a license proves, and what it does not

The United States has no general federal licensing or training standard for private security officers. Requirements are set by states, localities, employers and clients. The Bureau of Labor Statistics describes the typical path as a high school diploma, a background check and on-the-job instruction, and notes that many states recommend about 8 hours of pre-assignment training, 8 to 16 hours of on-the-job training, and 8 hours a year after that.

State rules vary widely. A Stateline review published on November 13, 2015, found that 41 states and the District of Columbia licensed security officers, while nine did not license them at the state level, and 22 states had no training requirement at all for unarmed officers. Fifteen of those 22 had none for armed officers either. Alaska required 48 hours of initial training; South Carolina required four. That reporting is now a decade old. Some states have changed their rules since, so the counts should be checked state by state. What has not changed is the absence of a national floor.

There is an irony worth naming. In that same article, Sandi Davies, then director and now chief executive officer of the International Foundation for Protection Officers, argued that states should require at least 40 hours of basic training. A decade later, there is still no national floor to measure any state against.

Where states do act, they can be specific. California requires power to arrest training before a security officer registration is issued, 32 hours of security officer skills training within the first six months, and eight hours of continuing training every year.

A license answers one question: is this person allowed to work? It does not tell a hospital, a school district, a stadium or a property manager whether that person can calm a crisis, write a report that will hold up in a deposition, or notice their own bias in a tense moment.

What the gap costs

First, people get hurt. The Bureau of Labor Statistics recorded 470 workplace homicides in 2024. Protective service occupations had 281 fatal work injuries that year, including 97 homicides, which is 34.5 percent of the fatalities in that group.

Second, people leave. When an occupation that is barely growing still needs more than 150,000 new people a year, the industry is not hiring to expand. It is hiring to replace. Every departure takes site knowledge with it, and every replacement starts at the bottom of the learning curve.

Third, the bill arrives later. In my professional experience, when a security incident ends up in litigation, two documents are requested early: the post orders and the training file. That is my opinion rather than a statistic, but any security executive who has sat for a deposition will recognize it.

The brand on the badge

Every officer is a brand ambassador three times over: for their employer, for the client whose name is on the building, and for the whole profession. When an officer handles a tense moment with calm and respect, people trust security a little more. When an officer gets it wrong, the headline rarely names the company. It just says, "security guard," the very word this profession has spent decades trying to outgrow.

That is why I believe certification should begin on the front line, not end in the manager's office.

America already has the blueprint

Here is the part of this story that deserves more attention than it gets. The United States already has a published, public competency model for this work. The Security Officers and Patrol Services Competency Model was published by the Department of Labor's Employment and Training Administration as version 1.0 in January 2023, and is available at no charge. The model document states that its development was championed by the International Foundation for Protection Officers in 2022, and that it draws on global research completed in 2021 and on the officer text the Foundation has updated since 1988.

The model is built as six tiers. The first three cover the foundation: personal effectiveness such as integrity and dependability; academic skills such as security fundamentals, communication and report writing; and workplace skills such as teamwork, problem solving and personal safety. Tier four is the technical core of the job: access control, basic investigations, rule enforcement, patrols and surveillance, alarm and emergency response, and customer service. Tiers five and six cover sectors and specific roles, from loss prevention to armored car to casino surveillance.

Read the fourth tier closely and you find expectations that many people assume are optional. Officers are expected to de-escalate confrontations, to know the difference between appropriate use of force and assault, to behave in a bias-free way with the public, and to respect and uphold the human rights of every person they deal with.

Any employer can download it today and map job postings, post orders, training plans and performance reviews against it at no cost. A state regulator could use it as the reference point for a training rule, although adoption would take action by the relevant authority and would carry implementation costs. The Foundation publishes all three models here, including proposed models for supervisors and instructors. The blueprint exists. What is missing is the habit of building to it.

A pathway that starts at the front line

I should restate my interest plainly before I name programs. I am a volunteer director of the Canadian division of the International Foundation for Protection Officers, whose programs are described below. Readers should weigh my view with that in mind, just as they would weigh any association leader's view of their own credentials.

With that on the table, here is a pathway built from the front line up:

1. Initial Security Officer Program. Sixteen hours of online training, 1.6 continuing education units and nine training units, covering the nature and role of the private security officer, observation and incident reporting, communication, access control, safeguarding information, emergency response and life safety awareness. It carries more than 90 assignments, and every section test and the final examination must be passed at 70 percent. List price at the time of writing is $40 for non-members.
2. Professional Security Officer Program. The next step up: 45 hours of online training, 4.5 continuing education units, 11 units and more than 115 assignments, covering the roles and responsibilities of the officer, asset protection, emergency evacuation, professional ethics and report writing. List price at the time of writing is $118 for non-members.

3. Certified Protection Officer. The Foundation's flagship frontline certification: 64 hours of training, 6.4 continuing education units, 11 units and more than 110 assignments, with a final examination. Candidates need six months of full-time protection officer experience, or one year part-time. The Foundation states a two-year recertification requirement. List price at the time of writing runs from $350 to $380 online, depending on the materials chosen.
4. Certified in Security Supervision and Management, for supervisors and emerging leaders, and the Certified Protection Officer Instructor credential for those who teach the Foundation's programs.
5. For experienced instructors, the Master Security Instructor designation. It is not a course. It is a peer-reviewed assessment of an instructor's security qualifications, teaching record and professional contribution, decided through a document review, peer interviews and a board decision. That is what a credential for trainers should look like, and the industry has needed one for a long time.

The online training behind these programs is delivered by Smart Horizons, which the Foundation identifies as an accredited provider offering continuing education units that comply with the standards of the International Accreditation for Continuing Education and Training. In plain terms, that accreditation applies to the continuing education units, and none of these programs replaces a state license.

These are not the only credible options. ASIS International, the International Association for Healthcare Security and Safety, community colleges and state associations all offer valuable programs. I would rather see an officer earn any credible, independently tested credential than none at all.

Who should pay

If officers carry the brand, the brand owners should invest in them. The national median wage for this work is $18.29 an hour. At that rate the entry course above costs about two hours of pay, and the full certification costs about nineteen to twenty-one hours. Set against total staffing cost, an employer-funded program is a small line item. Set against a family budget built on $38,020 a year, it is not.

A fair approach looks like this:

- Employers and clients pay for certification, not the officer.
- Learning happens on paid time.
- Programs give credit for prior learning and military or public safety experience.
- Training uses plain language, flexible formats and, where possible, more than one language.
- New credentials lead to better pay and a clear path to promotion.

The fair objections

Critics raise fair questions, and they deserve better than dismissal. Are the exams meaningful, or just memorization? Is this another certificate with a price tag? Why invest in people who may leave within two years?

Here is my honest answer. I have not found strong public evidence that frontline certification, on its own, improves outcomes. So let us measure it. Employers and clients can track complaints, use-of-force incidents, injuries and turnover before and after certification, map their training to the Department of Labor competency

model, and publish what they learn. Officers and the unions that represent them should help design the programs. Nobody knows the work better.

As for turnover: people who leave after two years still wore the uniform, still stood at the door, and still represented all of us. And if better training helps people stay, the investment pays twice.

What I am asking

- Officers: ask your employer about paid certification and a clear career path.
- Employers: fund certification, put it on paid time, and link it to pay.
- Clients and buyers: before you sign a security contract, ask four questions. What training do your officers have beyond the license? Who pays for it, and is it on paid time? What standard is it measured against? How are skills kept current?
- State legislators and regulators: you do not need to invent a standard. One already exists, published by the Department of Labor and available at no charge, and it could serve as the reference point for a state rule.

It's not the strongest that survives; it's the most adaptable. Our profession can adapt by raising the standard where the public meets it: at the front door. And we will do it the way this work always gets done. Strength in numbers.

About the author and disclosure

Walter Chan is a Certified Protection Professional (Lifetime Certificant) with more than 25 years of public-sector security experience in corporate security, corrections and critical infrastructure protection. He also holds the Certified Protection Officer, Certified Protection Officer Instructor and Certified in Security Supervision and Management certifications, and teaches part time at the college level.

Disclosure: he is a volunteer Director of the International Foundation for Protection Officers Canada, the Canadian division of the Foundation whose programs are described in this column. He is also a volunteer Director of the International Society of Crime Prevention Practitioners. He writes in a personal capacity. His views do not represent any employer or organization.

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