Managing Holiday Party Risks

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It’s time to celebrate! Whether your nonprofit landed a new grant, improved service to consumers, or logged a record number of volunteer hours this year, a celebratory party is overdue. Office parties are a great idea for numerous reasons. They provide an opportunity for telecommuters to reconnect with traditional commuters, they remind us that relationships in the workplace are valued more than compensation, and they afford the chance to take a breath and relax before the impossible deadlines and goals of the New Year are upon us.

But despite the potential for fun, camaraderie and celebration, holiday parties also present risks to employers and employees. Mission-eroding party outcomes include:

- Physical or emotional injury resulting from alcohol consumption
- Harassment suits alleging inappropriate conduct at a party
- Violations of the employee code of conduct
- Irreparable harm to relationships in the workplace

Before you cancel your upcoming fete, review the following tips to increase the safety of your holiday party. After all, a party should be a time of celebration, not a time to create evidence that will be used in a lawsuit against the nonprofit.

- **Limit alcohol consumption** — If an “alcohol free” party isn’t practical, limit alcohol consumption by using drink tickets (two per guest over 21 years of age), or close the bar at least one hour before the end of the party. Make sure that alcohol is served by a trained bartender who knows how to say “no” to an intoxicated guest.
- **Serve food throughout the party** — Make sure that food is plentiful and appealing for your holiday party. An enticing buffet or appetizing hors d’oeuvres will not only diminish the effect of alcohol, but will be appreciated by your staff.
- **Remind employees that the code of conduct remains in effect** — A simple reminder that the rules remain in effect may help reduce the risk of misconduct.
- **Expand the guest list** — Encourage all employees to bring a spouse, significant other or a close friend. These types of parties end earlier than ones employees attend alone. The environment is more family friendly and helps encourage proper conduct.
- **Offer a ride home** — Let employees know that the organization will happily provide a ride home to anyone who needs or wants one. Cab vouchers are an easy way to ensure that every attendee has the means to get a safe ride home and they can be distributed when a guest arrives.
- **Announce the dress code** — Ask employees to wear professional attire to the annual holiday party. Doing so will reduce the chance that an employee will dress inappropriately.

- **Follow-up with party spoilers** — Meet with any employee who behaves badly at the office party the very next day, or as soon as possible. Don't mince words when telling an employee that his or her conduct was unacceptable.
- **Discourage shop talk** — Remind staff that the party is a celebration, not a staff meeting. Avoiding shop talk during the party will also make guests feel welcomed and included.

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