Managing Special Event Risks

By Melanie Lockwood Herman

Executive Director

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Co-authored by Joe Risser and Melanie Lockwood Herman

Summer is here! Like predictable summer storms, high temps and visiting relatives, public entities from coast to coast are planning and presenting a wide range of special events. With our children home from school, workaholics taking much needed time off, and the stress of poor economic conditions affecting everything we do, many organizationss are moving forward with special events as a way to raise awareness about vital causes and raise funds to cover some of the costs of service delivery.

Well-planned and executed special events can bring positive publicity, and an infusion of cash to a public entity. But events that don't integrate sound risk management can spell disaster.

In *Managing Special Event Risks* we discuss "ten steps to safety" as a way of providing practical guidance on the planning and staging of a special event. The steps give a framework for the planners to follow to prevent and manage risk as well as finance losses associated with special events. This article explores the first two of these vital "steps."

STEP 1—Establish Goals

The first step in the development of a special events risk management program is to identify the organization's purpose in creating and sponsoring the event and to ensure that:

- the purpose and execution of the special event advance the mission of the organization. This can happen by providing service to the community (e.g. a blood drive), increasing awareness of the organization and its goals, raising funds for the achievement of those goals or a combination of these purposes.
- the special event and its activities are mission-appropriate. If something goes wrong at your event, the media coverage and community response to the event should not be "What were they thinking?"
- the organization has the resources and the skills to create and manage the special event. TIP: failure to plan = planning to fail.

Once you have established the overall purpose and goals of the special event and have confirmed that it will advance the nonprofit's mission and is mission-appropriate, you should identify event specific risk management goals. These may include:

- Prevent injury—including injuries to staff, spectators, participants and others—in the activity and ensure

rapid, effective and appropriate response to any injury.
- Operate legally and in compliance with agreements with facility owners and service providers.
- Reduce the cost of insurance and avoid jeopardizing eligibility for insurance coverage.
- Meet financial goals—for many public entities a key goal of special events is to generate net income that can be used for mission fulfillment.
- Avoid event cancellation—for example, an event planned by a public organization may be key to sustaining interest in a particular cause. Canceling the event could be disastrous to an ongoing advocacy effort or cause unnecessary ill will among stakeholders.
- Fulfill social responsibilities—risk management is sometimes perceived as part of a public entity's responsibility in offering programs which meet community needs.
- Reduce anxiety about risk—many entitys look at sound risk management practices as one way to manage the anxiety about mishaps that may be expressed by dedicated staff, officials and community members.
- By determining your risk management objectives before undertaking a special event, you can guide the process of planning and managing the event to increase the odds of success on many levels.

STEP 2—Organize to Manage the Special Event and Assign Key Functions

People are the key to success for most public entity programs, including special events. Organizing a team is a big step to ensure a successful event. Irrespective of how a team is organized, it is important to remember that each member of the group should view themselves as a team member.

The organizational structure used successfully for emergency response operations provides a simple and responsive functional model for a special events management team:

Special Event Director

- Overall leadership, responsibility, direction and control of the special event
- Public Information—Media
- Liaison—communication & coordination with representatives from other entities
- Safety for entire event, all operations

Operations Coordinator

- Services and activities involving attendees and participants
- Food, beverages, seating, lighting, communications
- Sanitation, trash, restrooms

Safety Coordinator

- Risk management, emergency response, evacuation, rain or rescheduling/relocation planning and coordination
- Incident and status reports during event, post-event evaluation

Logistics Coordinator

- Contracting with vendors providing supplies and services
- Coordinating services for event staff and volunteers

Finance Coordinator

- Registrations, sales and donations
- Insurance claims reporting and coordination

For a small event or activity all five functions can be managed by a person or two. For larger events, each of the primary functions should be assigned to a member of the special event management team. As a special event increases in size and complexity, additional people should be assigned specific tasks.

Creating a special events management team has the benefit of focusing on the planning and management of the special event and establishing who is specifically responsible for each function. Important information regarding the planning or management of the event can be handled by the team. This can be critical in emergency situations that require decisive action.

This structure is referred to as the “Incident Command System.” More information is available on this topic.

While some large entities have a fulltime risk manager, most small to mid-sized agencies use a team approach to identify and control risks in their day to day operations and special events. This approach has advantages when people from different units become advocates for safety. The likelihood of spotting hazards increases when more than one person is involved in the effort.

Managing special event risks requires equal measures of awareness, planning, diligence and team work. The time spent on this aspect of your special event is certain to contribute to the event’s success and the favorable reputation your organization enjoys in the community it serves.