Recreational Program Risks at Religious Organizations

Religious organizations are increasingly offering activities to engage children, teens and young adults. These activities may include recreational sports or church lock-ins, and they are often chosen because they can foster a sense of community. However, these activities also come with risks to both the children and your organization.

Before planning a church lock-in or youth sporting event at your organization, you should perform a risk assessment for each offered program to determine the associated hazards. Review the following guidance to build a successful risk management program at your institution.

Potential Risks

The risks associated with youth recreational activities are different from what your organization likely faces during the scope of day-to-day religious activities. Whether your organization is just beginning to think about youth-oriented programs or has been successfully running them for years, there are some important risks to think about. Consider the following:

* **Injuries**—Failing to act appropriately or failing to act entirely in response to an injury can lead to costly lawsuits. Additionally, your organization is responsible for removing hazards on the premises, including broken glass, an uneven playing surface and chemicals.
* **Staff training**—Even if your staff is well-prepared to work with children, they may not be adequately trained to identify and avoid potential risks associated with recreational activities.
* **Sports equipment**—Sports equipment can be hazardous if it is not properly fitted or maintained. If children are using equipment that’s too large for them, it may result in injury. Equipment should be inspected regularly to determine whether it’s suitable for use.
* **Facilities**—The facilities themselves can be a risk if they’re not properly maintained. Third-party facilities, parks and playgrounds can all result in injuries if hazards are not identified and addressed properly in a timely manner. Facilities should be vetted prior to using them for activity locations.
* **Sexual abuse**—Activities like lock-ins can lend to the risk of sexual assault, as perpetrators may take advantage of the darkness and isolation to abuse their victims. This risk may stem from staff, volunteers or other children.

Risk Mitigation

There are many risks associated with recreational programs. Proper risk management is necessary to control these risks and reduce the likelihood that injury or harm will come to a child. Here are some best practices to follow:

* **Injury prevention**—Ensure children are only participating in activities or sports that are appropriate for their age level. Equipment should be inspected before use to ensure it’s in good condition. In addition, all children should be wearing equipment that is suitable for their size.
* **Injury response**—Train all staff on emergency procedures, including first aid and CPR. The religious organization should have a response plan in place if an injury occurs. Also, response plans should be reviewed and training provided when new staff is hired annually afterward.
* **Planning**—Speak with your insurance company to make sure planned activities are covered under your policy. Make sure to have the proper coverage amounts in place. Consult with other religious institutions about their experience with similar activities and what types of coverage they have. Other religious organizations may participate in recreational activities, and, if so, using their procedures and policies may prove valuable to religious organizations starting to offer those same activities.
* **Release forms**—Prior to participation in any recreational sports or lock-ins, all guardians should sign a liability release form. A separate release form should be used for each activity. Every release form should outline possible risks associated with the activity it is for and release the organization from liability. In addition, the form should have a section for the child’s and guardian’s contact information and a signature line for consent.
* **Premises**—Research third-party facilities before partnering for activities. All staff should be properly trained on the activity and emergency response. Religious organizations should only use third-party facilities with a good reputation. Again, consult other organizations to see who they use and what the pros and cons are for those facilities.
* **Sexual abuse prevention**—Screen new volunteers and staff. Require applications, interviews and references from all candidates. Perform background checks, including criminal background checks. Implement a mandatory six-month waiting period before staff is allowed to interact with children. This will give you a chance to monitor them for inappropriate behaviors.

Make sure there is adequate supervision at events. There should be at least two adults monitoring the children at all times. If there are several children, make sure to have enough supervision for all of them. Restrict areas that are hard to monitor. Roll call is a helpful way to keep track of children and make sure nobody has become isolated from the group.

There is an additional risk that other youths may perpetuate sexual abuse. Gender segregation at lock-ins can help reduce this risk. It can also be beneficial to segregate children by age so there isn’t a significant power imbalance between older and younger children of the same gender.

Recreational activities such as lock-ins and recreational sports are becoming popular at religious organizations. Proper risk management can help reduce the likelihood of child injury or harm while maintaining the benefits of community building and youth engagement associated with these activities. For more information on how to manage risk at your religious organization, contact Mike Russell & Associates, Inc. today.