



Special Events Best Practices

Many public entities host at least one special event each year. Special events include parades, circuses, fairs, concerts, open houses, and certain sporting events, such as marathons. Generally, a special event is defined as an organized assembly or activity conducted by an individual or organization for a common purpose. Even if a public entity is not the organizer of an event, the entity may have responsibilities if the event involves the use of public facilities such as parks or fire stations or public services such as law enforcement or trash pick-up.

Controlling exposures from special events often requires the participation and consideration of several different departments. For example, law enforcement may develop a traffic control plan to keep traffic moving into and around the event, but, the plan may conflict with the plans of fire and EMS leaders for the staging and emergency exit of fire and EMS vehicles. All stakeholders should be at the planning table.

Attention to the following areas can minimize the risks and hazards of special events:

EVENT ORGANIZATION

Whether the event is small, medium-sized, or large-scale, a team of knowledgeable individuals should be organized to plan for the needs of the event. There should be a written organizational chart to define who will be responsible for each goal and the lines of communication. Organizers of medium-sized and large-scale events should hold regular meetings where minutes are kept and formal action plans are developed.

BUILDING AND FACILITIES

Inspect all permanent structures such as bleachers, grandstands, or stages during the planning and just before the event. Ensure the proper permits are filed for temporary structures that will be erected. Inspect walkways and parking lots that will be used for the event. Inspect athletic fields with the event organizer. All inspections should be documented.

Supplemental lighting may be needed for night events. Sanitary concerns will be a significant consideration for large crowds and if food will be served. Portable toilets may be necessary. Health departments generally recommend one toilet for every 250 people, based on a maximum expected attendance.

FIRE & LIFE SAFETY

The fire inspector should review the projected occupancy of all enclosures, use of tents, or other temporary structures. Fire permits may be needed for the handling of vehicle fuel, cooking facilities, and the use of an open flame or fireworks. Make provisions for inspecting electrical wiring installed for the event.

Include the local fire and EMS departments in planning. The event may require additional fire and EMS crews to handle the excess call volume that can be expected. Standby crews may need to be scheduled to monitor specific operations, such as fireworks. Mutual aid from neighboring towns should be considered.

LAW ENFORCEMENT AND SAFETY

Make sure there are enough police officers, lifeguards, and other emergency personnel assigned to the event to ensure the safety of all participants while still maintaining routine services to the community. Law enforcement agencies should develop specific written plans for missing children, terrorism, and private security services.

This bulletin is intended for general information purposes only. It should not be construed as legal advice or legal opinion regarding any specific or factual situation. Always follow your organization's policies and procedures as presented by your manager or supervisor. For further information regarding this bulletin, contact your Safety Director at 877.398.3046.

TRAFFIC CONTROL

Map out parking areas and travel routes to and from an event site to avoid traffic problems, both for event attendees and non-participants who must travel through the area. Coordinate with local Traffic Safety Officers for the placement of barriers, cones, and warning signs. The Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices provides guidance on traffic control for special events.

It is especially important to keep emergency routes open for ambulances, fire trucks, and other emergency vehicles.

FOOD AND BEVERAGES

If food is served or sold at the event, verify food handling, preparation, and distribution comply with local and county food safety guidelines. Coordinate with health departments to schedule inspections. If alcohol is to be served, strong controls must be established for its distribution and consumption. The availability of alcohol may necessitate additional law enforcement or emergency medical personnel. Including alcohol as a part of a special event requires close communications with your risk manager.

SANITATION / CLEAN UP PLAN

Groups using public facilities should have a plan for cleaning up equipment, premises, or streets after an event. They should be notified in writing that if they do not clean up satisfactorily or if they damage public property, they will be financially responsible for cleanups or repairs.

SPECIAL EVENTS / FACILITY USE PERMITS

Public entities should require that all groups complete an application for a special event. Designate a staff person to administer the Special Event / Facility Use Permit process. There should be an appeals process available to applicants. The decisions of the person reviewing the appeal should be final.

The public agency should have a Special Event Planning Organization that meets to plan and discuss every event. Some events will be simple and routine. Other events will be complicated and require careful planning. The Permit Administrator should coordinate the event requirements with other departments as needed, e.g., police, fire department, first aid unit, parks, roads, etc. The Incident Command System provides a useful framework for the Special Event Planning Organization.

INSURANCE & LIABILITY CONCERNS

Consult with your Risk Management Consultants regarding insurance requirements and options. Consult with your local and Joint Insurance Fund attorneys for new or unusual situations. Some issues to consider discussing with Risk Managers and Solicitors include:

- Facility Use Agreements.
- Hold Harmless and Indemnification Agreements.
- Compliance with local special event ordinances.
- Updating ordinances.
- Minimum levels of insurance coverage.
- Requirements of [MEL Coverage Bulletins for Fireworks and Amusement Rides, including Inflatables](#)

Special events provide many benefits. They also present many challenges to the community. Overcoming these challenges starts with a good plan and organization. Involve all stakeholders early to minimize surprises. The Joint Insurance Fund Administration, Underwriter, Safety Director, and Risk Manager are ready to help. The MEL Safety Institute (MSI) provides a sample [Special Event Safety Checklist](#) to assist with planning, please modify it to suit the needs of each special event.