

# **Managing Risk in Recreation Programs, Facilities and Services**

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The management of risk in programs, facilities and services is essential to the sustainability and viability of recreation agencies. Protecting the safety of participants and employees should be the top priority in the provision of any recreational activity, program or service. Proactive management must take place to reduce the risk of injury, death, damage or liability as a result of participation in recreation offerings. This is not an easy task given the inherent risks involved in many recreational activities.

The inherent risks of various sport and recreational activities are in large part the reason individuals enjoy participating. The rush of adrenalin that results from participation in a challenging basketball game, skiing down a mountain, rappelling from a cliff, swimming across a pool, or hiking in the wilderness creates a desire for the recreational experience. If managers sought to eliminate all risk from recreation activities, there would be few programs or facilities in existence. By providing experiences in which risk is addressed or controlled, recreation professionals are serving the needs and demands of the public while protecting their patrons, staff and agencies.

## **INHERENT RISKS AND HAZARDS**

Patrons of recreation programs, facilities and services should be informed of the potential risks and the level of challenge involved so that they can make informed decisions about whether to participate. Their acceptance of the inherent risks of participation, understanding of the safety precautions being taken, role in protecting their own safety and that of others are important parts of managing risk. It is the responsibility of the recreation provider to remove or address hazards. Hazards are conditions present that are unknown or not understood by the user as having the potential to cause injury. Hazards include an uneven or wet playing surface on a soccer field, presence of chemicals near a pool, broken glass in a park, or inappropriate use zones in a playground. Operators must take proactive steps to eliminate hazards immediately or take measures to stop use of the area. Patrons must be informed and warned about hazards while the situation is being rectified.

## **NEGLIGENCE**

It is important to understand the legal responsibility of recreation providers. A staff member of a recreation program hired to provide oversight of programs, facilities or services has a legal duty to take action to prevent injuries and respond effectively when an injury occurs. A breach of this duty, either failure to act or taking action that is not appropriate, that results in actual loss or harm is negligence. Understanding what

negligence is and actively taking measures to act responsibly will reduce the potential for injury, damages, death and liability for recreation staff and agencies.

### STANDARD OF CARE

To determine appropriate actions that staff members should take, in accordance with the accepted standard of care, several comparisons should be made. Whether the action was reasonable under the circumstances and in accordance with what a reasonable and prudent person would do in a similar situation is one standard for comparison. Another standard is the generally accepted practice in the field, which can be analyzed using information from regulatory agencies, professional organizations such as the California Parks and Recreation Society, and legal decisions. Comparisons can also be made to the operating procedures and policies of similar recreation agencies. Staff members should be trained to act in compliance with written policies and procedures of the agency which are based on the comparisons listed here.

### PRACTICAL SOLUTIONS TO MANAGE RISK

Practical solutions to reduce injury, death, damages and liability in recreation programs begin with planning and training. Staff members must identify and analyze potential risks and plan in advance methods for removing hazards and addressing risks. Elements that could contribute to dangerous situations must be eliminated or mitigated. Staff members should receive ongoing training on the procedures developed to manage risk. An annual training session supported by regular in-service training on specific topics reflects a proactive approach to managing risk. Training topics include procedures for inspection of facilities and activity areas prior to and after use, routine maintenance and repair, use of informed consent and waiver forms for participants, and notice of hazards. Document the date, time and staff in attendance at training sessions. Agencies should consult with legal counsel and develop protocols for the length of time documents and records should be retained. Expert review of forms, policies and procedures on a regular basis is another practical solution to risk management. The risk management plan should be monitored for effectiveness continually, and changes made as necessary.

Quality maintenance programs play an important role in managing risk. Checklists are often used to perform daily or weekly inspections of facilities, parks and playgrounds. Staff should actively seek out and remove hazards, make repairs, and provide warning when an area is not safe for activity. Records of inspections, maintenance and repairs should be maintained to demonstrate the agency is diligent in risk management. Retain records for the period specified in agency protocols. Equipment used for activity must be inspected regularly and replaced or removed when needed. Annual inspections by a certified professional of equipment, surfacing, and facilities demonstrate a proactive approach to safety. An objective third party can identify areas of concern sometimes overlooked by staff which can then be promptly addressed.

## SUMMARY

Recreation agencies and staff are responsible for the safe provision of programs, facilities and services. The public expects and deserves a knowledgeable, professional, and diligent approach to removal of hazards and management of risk in recreation. Although the task seems difficult, risk can be addressed and managed proactively. Planning based on generally accepted practices in the field of recreation is a good place to start managing risk. Recreation providers should develop a plan of action based on the standard of care in the industry and train staff to adhere to the risk management policies and procedures of the agency. This training involves identification of hazards and risks, warning and informing users, and taking steps to remove, reduce, or address hazards. Routine maintenance and repair should be performed and documented. Inspections by staff and audits from outside experts are important components for addressing safety and compliance to industry standards. The process of risk management requires ongoing assessment and attention. Changes should be made as needed to provide for the safety of individuals engaged in recreational activities.

### Suggested Resources

Appenzeller, H. (1998). *Risk management in sport*. Durham, N.C.: Carolina Academic Press.

Peterson, J.A. and Hronek, B.B. (2003). *Risk management for park, recreation and leisure services*. Champaign, IL: Sagamore Publishing.

Spengler, J.O., Connaughton, D.P., and Pittman, A.T. (2006). *Risk management in sport and recreation*. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.

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