

What's Up at www.myspace.com?

At a number of conventions this year there have been many panel discussions involving potential problems that organizations can face with regard to the www.myspace.com web site postings. The following are a couple of the issues that youth organizations are facing:

- Because the web site might be considered public domain, do youth administrators now have a responsibility to check out potential employee or volunteer web site information (in addition to criminal background and reference checks)? What are the legal ramifications for making an employment decision based on photographs that are posted there?
- Your organization may have written permission from the parents to use photographs of youth for web sites or brochures, but that permission does not extend to staff posting pictures that they have taken of youth. In most cases, your insurance policy probably excludes coverage for this.
- What legal issues could your organization face if staff members or youth "bad mouth" your organization on their web sites? Or if youth use their web sites to make threats or nasty remarks about others they've met through your organization?

Obviously, there are a host of legal issues including employment practice violations, slander, invasion of privacy, child abuse, illegal use of photographs, etc. Consult an attorney about your responsibilities and options for dealing with a variety of situations that could arise. Also talk with your insurance agent as coverage for some occurrences may be excluded, depending on the circumstances.

One of the recommendations that emerged time and time again was that your organization needs to educate parents about monitoring their child's web activities. Many parents don't even know that their child has set up a web site, and are unaware of the risks that could result from sexual predators viewing that personal information on the web site. One police detective commented that children freely disclose more information on my-space than a private investigator could find. NBC Dateline has videotaped and written a number of terrifying stories about online sexual predators that you might use as teaching examples for parents. Such education efforts can help build a stronger relationship with parents as well as protect youth and your organization.

If your organization has a web site that allows youth to e-mail others, be aware that you probably do not have insurance coverage for any threats or improper communications made by youth or staff. Talk to your insurance agent and possibly an attorney to understand the risks and identify some solutions or alternatives.

There are a number of software blocking programs that you can obtain, although some have mixed results as teens learn to hack their way around settings. Netintelligence (www.netintelligence.com) sells a software program that blocks web sites, sets specific time limits for use by each child, permits you to view all conversations that have taken place, and includes firewall/ anti virus/anti spyware protection.