

Hosting Community Dances

Dances that are open to the public offer some unique benefits:

Recruiting new members: Teen-serving programs have found dances to be the great equalizer as they often bring teens into the facility who might not normally attend program functions. Youth organizations can recruit new members through dances, but must be deliberate about it. For example, some programs take time to provide tours of the facility and take breaks to talk about teen activities, programs, and future events.

Developing skills: Staff can often use dances as a vehicle to develop organizational and leadership skills in youth. Teens placed on committees can plan and organize these events, hire a DJ, work on a safety plan, promote the event, handle concession sales, and clean up.

However, be aware that there is a downside to poorly planned and under-supervised dances. Experience has shown that a number of confrontations, fights, and even shootings have occurred at dances that were open to the public. Also, a number of directors said that community dances did not improve permanent enrollment or lead to significant increase in numbers of youth involved in the program. Two key issues for youth programs to consider are:

- Increase visible security both inside and outside of the facility. Position staff by exit doors, at bathrooms, in the parking lot, and in access corridors to isolated parts of the building. Also, strongly consider hiring off-duty, uniformed police officers, particularly for entrance and parking lot security.
- Ensure all staff receive proper training on how to intervene in the event of an incident. Your organization should have a written policy on handling physical confrontations that involve members as well as non-members.

Here are a couple of suggestions for reducing risks at community dances:

- Limit entry to one time; youth who leave the building may not re-enter.
- Require youth to check their purses, packages, and backpacks before they are allowed into the dance. These items can be checked at a sign-in desk and sealed in a paper bag.
- Set a time for the dance to end and have a plan in place to encourage dispersal out of the parking lot. A specific end time will also discourage loitering.
- Restrict building access to only one entrance and exit point. All other exit doors should have alarm-bars to restrict uninvited guests from entering. It's also advisable to post a staff member at the doors.
- Station an off-duty, uniformed police officer by the front door and one in the parking lot. Having the officer in full uniform may help discourage many problems and promote a faster response time for backup should problems occur.
- Don't turn off the lights on the dance floor. If adults can't see problems emerging, it's hard to stop them in the early stages.

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Other options to consider:

- Consider holding separate dances for younger (ages 12 to 14) and older (ages 15 to 18) teens. These age groups often don't mix well, so separate dances may help prevent problems.
- Limit attendance to members and their dates.
- If you limit attendance to members, consider adding another requirement: members must have attended program activities for at least five days over the past month.
- Have a sign-up sheet so you know in advance who and how many are planning to attend the dance. This will help you plan for staffing and security. It's better to over-staff than under-staff a dance.
- Depending on the size of your dance or the violence history, consider selecting guests at random and scanning them with a hand-held metal detector.

If you have a safety or risk management question or a suggestion for a topic, please contact Markel's Risk Management Department at safety1st@markelcorp.com.