

When developing physical activity programs a number of safety, legal and administrative issues merit special attention.

Safety Considerations

Events that involve any significant physical activity require additional steps both for the safety of the participants and for protection of the sponsoring organization and its representatives from liability that might arise if a participant should sustain an injury.

At the start of each exercise event the leader should describe the activity with particular emphasis on the level of physical challenge involved. For a walk or bike ride the description should include the length of the course, the number and steepness of the hills, the condition of the trail or road and a general statement about the degree of difficulty (such as easy, moderate or strenuous). This description should be tailored to the nature of the activity and the physical condition of the participants.

The leader should inquire about the physical capacity of each participant. There are many ways to do this, from general questions about exercise experience as part of an initial greeting to specific questions to the group during the pre-event remarks.

A good question to ask the group is whether anyone has a medical condition that might affect his or her ability to take part in the event. Those who respond in the affirmative deserve special attention, and to protect their privacy, they should be taken aside by one of the leaders while the rest of the group begins to stretch. Follow-up questions should determine whether they have discussed this type of exercise with their doctors and whether they've had any sort of problem related to exercise in the past. If there's any concern regarding their safety, they should obtain clearance from their physicians

before participating in the event. (See Chapter 19: Medical Issues.)

Sign-Up Sheets

For each event or program there should be a sign-in sheet to provide the sponsoring organization with a record of who the participants were and how they can be reached. At the top it should state the name of the sponsoring organization, the type of event, the date and the name of the leader or leaders. For each of the participants there should be spaces for their names, addresses, telephone numbers and email addresses. A template for a sign-up sheet suitable for an event that doesn't involve physical activity, such as a lecture or Discussion Group, can be found in the Appendix on page 23-3. The form is also available on the Fifty-Plus Web site in electronic formats (both Excel and Word) that are easily customized.

If a recurring event is successful and draws a large attendance, the sign-in process can be rather time-consuming, often making it impossible to get everyone signed up before the event begins. One possible solution is to use the same sign-up sheet template to create a computer file into which participants' information can be entered after an event. Then the sign-up sheet for the next event can be printed out with names and contact information already in place in alphabetical order. At the beginning of the event, each participant who has attended previously can simply check their information, update if necessary, and then sign at the right side of that line.

If the group is large, it will be even more efficient to provide two or three copies of the set of sign-up sheets so participants don't have to wait as long to check in.

Someone will need to volunteer to type everyone's information into a computer in order

to create a mail/email/phone list for the group. It involves very little additional work to copy-and-paste the information into the cumulative sign-up sheet file before the next event. It may actually save much of the time that is otherwise spent trying to decipher each participant's handwriting at every event, and the frequent updates will certainly improve the accuracy of the group's mailing list.

Release of Liability

For all events involving physical activity, it is essential to obtain a statement of fitness and a release of liability from each participant. The release should state that the participant understands that there is a risk of injury with physical activity and releases the sponsoring organization and its representatives from all liability for damages from personal injury (including death) or property damage arising from participation. The paragraph should also indicate that the individual is stating that he or she is in good physical condition to participate in events involving physical activity.

Page 23-1 in the Appendix is a template for a combined Event Sign-In Sheet and Liability Release that should be used for any event that involves physical activity. Each local group should consult with its attorney on the specific language for the release of liability.

It's also important to obtain emergency contact information for each participant, with the name and telephone number of a person to call in case of a medical emergency. The form on page 23-2 of the Appendix combines emergency contact information with a liability release. If each participant is asked to complete this form at the time of their first participation, it provides a blanket release that is in effect even if a participant fails to complete the Sign-In Sheet and Liability Release at a specific event.

If the above discussion seems rather complex, a quick look at the sample forms should be reassuring. Remember that all three forms can be downloaded in electronic format from the Web site at www.50plus.org and then easily customized to fit your local situation.