

6-14-14 Mud, Money, Food, and Fun

Can we have fun and be safe? We can do our best to aim for that!. Plympton and Halifax have what we call Large Outdoor Event regulations. They were modeled on the National Safety Council's guidance. Plympton adopted them after coming close to seeing a motorcycle rally last summer for which no one was prepared. The posters offered camping, tattoos, a battle of the bands and lots of food. Without time to prepare, it was a nightmare of concerns for the board of health and the police and fire departments.

Halifax has been practicing them for a few years now. Practice has helped, but with more and more large outdoor events on the rise, it was time to actually permit these events so that we could have sufficient time for good planning. Having the requirement of a permit triggers documentation, dialogue and deadlines.

The documentation delivers names and contact information, along with maps and drawings indicating activities, bathrooms, first aid stations, and traffic plans with well-marked enter and exit signs, handicap parking and food vendors.

Seeing the plan on paper allows for a better dialogue. Will there be generators? How will you cordon them off? Will there be extension cords? If so, is there sufficient power and how will you prevent them from being trip hazards? Were you thinking of having tents to provide some shade? That would be very much appreciated but is the tent constructed of flame retardant material? Has the tent owner provided liability insurance? Will there be any propane tanks for cooking? The fire chief wants to see a ten foot flexible hose between flame and fire and no flames under a canopy of any kind.

Food safety at temporary outdoor events is certainly achievable, just as preparing and serving safe food while camping is achievable. As we say in the health agent biz, "It's not what they do but how they do it". In the case of temporary events, I would be unprepared for that inspection if we simply gathered the paperwork, certifications, insurance and a check. It is the conversation back at the office long before the event that allows me to have a better understanding of how they will achieve cold holding, hot holding, storage, staffing and prep areas. The discussion of the menu and the hours of operation determine the requirements of the event.

Why the hours of operation? A four hour window, or one meal, simplifies everything. Once cooked, food can be served at room temperature and disposed of at the end of the event. Few worries. For an all day event, or for most restaurants, there is the constant concern of hot holding, cold holding, and labeling with dates and even time stamping.

I would much rather prevent a problem than be involved in responding to one. And that is why we spend a lot of time prior to an event, interviewing the food applicants and why we require, at a minimum, a month's notice.

Last Sunday saw two applicants in Halifax for our Large Outdoor Event regulations: the Hop for Hops playground fundraiser of a 5k and 1k race/walk. They used a previously planned route, that for John's Race and kept the Police and Fire Departments involved and informed of

the ever evolving plans. Growing plans are the nature of fund raising events but at least having the guidance in place allowed for a better understanding of the need for preventing problems. Take “jumpy houses”, for instance. Is anyone watching? Are there any age/size rules? Where is the power source and where are the extension cords?

All was well organized, with two jumpy houses, one for larger children and one for small ones. The power source was checked with the custodians. The extension cords were discussed with the building department. The “Snack Shack” was a wonder of organization with well-rehearsed staff and food safety knowledge; a health agent’s dream.

Crossing the street, I continued on to the Mud Fest! I had met every applicant but until I see them in operation, there is trepidation. The event had clearly benefited from the previous year’s experience; in particular, with cordoning off the row of food vendors with orange “snow fencing” all along the back sides of the trucks, trailers, fryolators and grills. Without that fencing, last year saw families with young children walking in between those cooking devices and over cords. I know because I saw it.

All the food vendors received positive inspection reports. One grill person needed assistance in order to avoid “No Bare Hand Contact with Ready to Eat Foods”. I was delighted the person in charge was familiar with the concept and a quick addition to the personnel solved the problem.

The scorching sun and mid-eighties temperatures did pose safety challenges. Several people told me of a collapsing woman who needed assistance from the Fire Department. Tents are good but they need to be of fire retardant material and properly engineered.

While inspecting the food vendors I saw mothers using the hand washing station to cool their children’s faces, arms and legs. (I think we should consider water misters next year.) I watched with curiosity a young boy of about eight, who seemed to be there with an older brother, pressing away on that foot pedal, apparently washing his hands. I decided to find out if the water tank needed re-filling. No, everything was fine; he was just enjoying that pressing on the pedal. Mothers of the world: if only we had known; we could have included a pressing device at our sinks to make hand washing more fun! I bet his hands were never as clean at home as at this Mud Fest!

All’s well that ends well. It seems simple while you’re having fun but behind the scenes, the planning pays off.

Last Sunday’s events reminded me of my childhood’s memory of safety: Fire, Police and Board of Health are there to help.

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