

Risk Reporter

for Camps and Conference Centers

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Finding camp personnel is year-round project

Many camps might not operate year-round, but handling the task of staffing a camp and conference center is a full time job.

Finding the right personnel is virtually a year-round task, even for those operations like Cheley Colorado Camp located near Estes Park, Colo., that is only open nine weeks each summer.

"Last year, we closed Aug. 10 and started sending out thank you letters to each staff member around Sept. 10," President Jeff Cheley revealed. "Most of our staff is invited back, and we send them a reapplication that is due Dec. 1."

"We give returning staff until the middle of January to apply," Director Andy Lilienthal of Camp Winnebago in South Portland, Maine, said.

In other words, the process remains fluid long after the last cabin has been shuttered.

Addressing the returnees

Cheley needs 180 people each summer and typically returns about 100. Lilienthal needs 80 people each summer and typically returns about 40.

Who you want back takes precedence over who wants to come back.

"There are only about three to five each year who we tell, 'We're glad you were here, but maybe employment in another place would be better,'" Cheley said.

"My first three years here, I would say my success rate at picking staff was about 50 percent," Lilienthal admitted. "Over the last four years, I would say 90 percent. It's like anything else—if you spend a lot of time on it, you will get better at hiring."

Looking for new blood

This process seems to start earlier every year.

"We had some people who showed up last summer who were coming to interview for 2010," Cheley observed. "Those are the kind of people you want—who are thinking that far ahead."

"I received applications for the summer of 2010 in September of 2009," Lilienthal said. "I certainly respond and touch base with those folks, but I don't really act on them until January. That's when I have a really good sense of what our needs are."

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Slotting the positions

Up-to-date job descriptions are essential for both counselors and support staff. They should encompass all of the anticipated duties that person will be asked to perform, including such things as heavy lifting in the kitchen.

The best approach is trying to fit skill sets into the appropriate positions.

"I'm a big believer that people are good at what they're good at," Lilienthal reasons. "It's a tricky business to take someone who's a great canoeing counselor and make them head of the waterfront. Sometimes those skills don't necessarily translate. For me, it's about matching the personalities and experience with the position that's available."

"In some of these, you're looking for a specialty or skill," Cheley agreed. "If they're going to be a backpacking counselor, they need to have experience in the backcountry."

Which is not to say Plan B cannot be employed.

"I'm very open with those candidates about the next best available position," Lilienthal said. "If someone is applying for a swimming position and we're full, I might say 'Look, this is another position. I think you would be great at it.'"

A proper mix ensures that staffers complement one another.

"You don't want all Type A personalities," Lilienthal pointed out. "You don't want all of the chefs who want to run the kitchen. You want folks who are going to be good and who the campers can relate to. You want the candidates who really will get the essence and value of camp and their jobs and translate that into performance."

The interview process

Face to face is the best possible scenario.

"It used to be that we were so focused in the summer that those who would stop in to apply, we would tell them we were glad they were interested but call us in September," Cheley said. "Now we realize these are the people we want so let's give them a few minutes to talk and maybe give them a more extensive interview later."

Telephone interviews may be more practical.

"We're doing more of them now because we're getting applications from all over," Cheley said. "It's just so easy to hear about us because of the Internet."

"If they send me an application and it looks reasonable, I'll set up a phone interview," Lilienthal said. "After the phone interview, which usually lasts one or two hours, I will generally check references and do a follow-up call."

Both locations require applicants to have three references and make it a practice of calling those people.

The investigative process

Background checks are essential for people working with boys and girls.

"We do them for everyone we hire," Lilienthal said.

"When we send out a job offer, we include a Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) fingerprint card," Cheley said. "Those have to be returned within 21 days."

"FBI background checks are not real efficient," he continued. "There is usually a five- to eight-week turnaround time. That's the advantage of hiring your staff early—if you had hired someone in May, there would have been a chance they were on your staff for four or five weeks before the background check came back."

Many camps utilize various background screening companies for this service. Camps and conference centers insured by Church Mutual can partner with LexisNexis® for reduced rates on background screening. Go to www.churchmutual.com and click on "Safety Resources" for more information.

Finding the right attributes

Maturity is important.

"We don't hire any counselor until after they have finished their first year of college," Lilienthal said.

"Our guidelines are that counseling staff must have completed their sophomore year in college," Cheley said. "Support staff must have completed their freshman year in college."


"As society has gone, camps have also gone in terms of taking on a greater responsibility for the development and well-being of children," Lilienthal said. "We ask a lot of the staff not only to keep the kids safe and teach them but to be real positive role models. If counselors have not gone to college or had a real wealth of life experiences, they're less able to handle that kind of high-level requirement."

Positive past interactions with children are just as important.

"First and foremost, I want counselors and staff who work well with children," Lilienthal said. "And then secondarily, they can teach the skills. If you're an all-American athlete, but you don't know how to work with kids, it doesn't matter how good you are."

"The main thing is that we're looking for people who have had some youth development experience," Cheley agreed, "whether it's volunteering, babysitting or working in a child care center. Or some of that may be an older sibling who has three younger siblings they were involved in raising. That gives us some sign."

- **For more information on employment practices**, visit www.churchmutual.com, click on "Safety Resources" and scroll down to Workforce Management.



Managing Your Risks

Swimmer safety

In 2005, Church Mutual asked six customers to test our new Swimmer Safety Program. Involved in this pilot program were four camps and two worship centers. The program received rave reviews and some minor recommendations. After some tweaking, the free program was offered to all of our customers in early 2006.

The program includes guidelines for evaluating the skill level of swimmers and color-coded wristbands to issue to all swimmers based on that skill level.

- Red - Nonswimmers
- Yellow - Intermediate Swimmers
- Green - Qualified Swimmers

For more information on the program, go to www.churchmutual.com, click on "Safety Resources" and scroll down to "Swimmer Safety."

Orders for the program have been impressive. We've distributed more than 1.5 million wristbands in the first four years. However, participation in the program decreased last year—fewer inquiries and fewer orders.

Organizations that participate in water activities, whether on site or off site, cannot get lax in their efforts to prevent drowning and other water accidents.

Drowning is the fourth most common cause of death from unintentional injury in the United States. Almost 5,000 people drown each year, and 20,000 people have near-drowning experiences that result in hospitalization.

Supervision and restricting water access to only those qualified to swim are two important steps to enhance the safety of your water activities.

If you have not tried our Swimmer Safety Program, I urge you to go to our Web site and place an order. Remember that there's no cost to you. We even pay for the shipping.

If you have used our program in the past, check your inventory of wristbands and order more if needed.

Richard J. Schaber, CPCU, CRM
Risk Control Manager



Seasonal Spotlight

Contingency planning should involve everyone

The whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

That's the message conveyed by expert Greg Friese when talking about contingency planning for camps and conference centers.

"The first thing is to do a hazard analysis where you engage all of your departments," the founder and president of Emergency Preparedness Systems LLC in Plover, Wis., said. "Getting buy-in to the planning process as well and what your response will be. The more you engage everybody in that process, the better off you're going to be."

Separate camp departments (like maintenance, housekeeping, food preparation, technology and finance) should intently analyze their areas.

"When you're doing risk management or crisis planning, you've got to involve everybody on the staff," Friese said. "Each person should go back to their department and think about the what-ifs. What could go wrong in the dining hall? What could go wrong in the maintenance area in terms of the vehicles and equipment they have on property and the accessibility to it?"

One of the first potential problems camps need to look at is what Mother Nature can hurl at them.

"Whether it be tornadoes, thunderstorms or lots of snow," Friese said. "Heavy snowfall is not likely for a camp in Florida for instance. But, if you're in a tweener location like Missouri, you might have to be thinking about getting snowed in or pipes freezing."

Another contingency plan could involve a missing camper.

"Whether they wander off the property, leave a trip group or get left behind at a rest stop," Friese said. "Whether you're hiking or driving."

It can get worse.

"Take that loss out to another extreme like a drowning," Friese said. "That certainly would be an emergency to be prepared for—the focus there has got to be on prevention."

Then there's pandemic planning to add to the mix.

"Certainly, that was an issue for camps last summer with H1N1," Friese allowed. "That whole piece of hygiene and the way illness spreads in a closed community has really changed in the last 10 years. Again, it's an all-hazards approach, teaching kids and staff how to wash their hands and coughing etiquette."

It doesn't end there.

Other potential problems could include fire drills, foodborne illnesses and compromising of information technology to name just a few.

Camps should use contingency planning as a blueprint to get better.

Q | A

A Perspective

With their rather remote locations and natural settings, camps can be difficult to employ adequate lighting for in the late evening and early morning hours. Risk Reporter spoke with Church Mutual Senior Risk Control Representative Kevin Nugent, who has been providing risk control services to Church Mutual customers for more than 22 years. He holds an associate degree in fire protection engineering technology from Delaware Technical and Community College, has his Associate in Risk Management designation and is a Certified Pool Operator.



Risk Reporter: What areas would you recommend motion detector lighting be used?

Nugent: Motion detector lighting should be used in areas that you feel do not need to be lit up all the time but only when someone is in the area. They can be installed near your maintenance buildings and other service areas where camp staff may have to go during hours when it is dark. It also could be used around swimming pools, ponds or lakes. Motion detector lighting also can work as a security measure, because if the light is on, then the camp staff should check to see who is in the area. It is a way to save money as opposed to leaving lights on all of the time. There are some areas where these lights should never be used—the infirmary and the camp office or whatever building is used for emergency contact on the grounds. These areas should always be visible even in the middle of the night.

Risk Reporter: Which are the most important areas to have proper lighting to prevent trips, slips and falls?

Nugent: Any stairways and walkways around the campgrounds. Most of the camps have lighting in areas where they have stairways that are constructed to all of the newer standards. The areas where most camps need better lighting are the more remote walkways that the camps want to keep more rustic looking. They can install some of the newer low-level lighting that only lights the walking surfaces. This lighting does not light up the entire area and still keeps the campgrounds rustic. One of the other things that a camp can do to help reduce the trips and falls on the remote trails and walkways is assure that there are a sufficient number of flashlights for groups using these trails at night.

Risk Reporter: Are you seeing anything new in lighting techniques at camps?

Nugent: The use of LED lights in many areas. They are usually smaller light fixtures that are less obtrusive and provide more light than old-style lighting. They are normally used on some of the remote trails and walkways around the campgrounds to light only the ground. They also give the camp the ability to use different color lighting for a more decorative look in areas around the campgrounds. The camp can use a different color for each area, which shows them at a glance without having to know specifically where each area is. Emergency responders can be instructed to respond to a specific color, and that can reduce response time once they are on the grounds.

Risk Reporter: Do energy-efficient bulbs pay off in the long run, even at camps that are only open three to four months?

Nugent: Yes. In talking to camp directors, electricity is one of their largest expenses each year. So even the camps that are only open a few months a year are always looking for ways to reduce this cost. The newer energy-efficient bulbs have shown that they save energy costs, and even though they may not save as much money as a year-round camp, they will still save something. I have seen substantially more use of these bulbs in the last year at camps I have surveyed. The only negative comment that I have heard is that these bulbs do not appear to give as much light as old-style bulbs did.

- **If you have a question for Kevin,** e-mail him at knugent@churchmutual.com.