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Sandra Weaver (stw126@psu.edu) is an Associate Director of Compliance and the Director of Youth Program Compliance in the Department of Ethics and Compliance at Penn State University in State College, Pennsylvania, USA.



Michael Ambrose (michael@campdoc.com) is the Founder and CEO of DocNetwork in Ann Arbor, Michigan, USA.

Recognizing potential health and safety risks for minors on campus

By Sandra Weaver, MS, and Michael Ambrose, MD

Over the past decade, there has been a heightened awareness related to the protection of minors in the higher education environment. More institutions are hiring individuals to oversee youth protection efforts, and state/regional peer groups are growing in numbers. In addition, a national association, the Higher Education Protection Network,^[1] was created in 2017, and the American Camp Association recently created a new member section, Camps on Campus.^[2] Both organizations are committed to promoting good practices, risk awareness, health and safety, staff training, and quality of youth programs on campus across the nation.

Through these efforts, it has become clear that college and university campuses play host to a diverse array of minors, engaging them in academics, enrichment, and athletic programs—with the number of children served in the hundreds of thousands on many campuses. While these activities offer invaluable experiences, they also come with a unique set of health and safety considerations. Over the years, additional, unrecognized risks have been identified. Management of these risks and compliance oversight have become essential in promoting a secure and nurturing environment. The well-being of minors participating in programs sponsored by these institutions of higher education is becoming an obvious priority.

Additional identified risks

Awareness and management of allergies

Food allergies in children have become a prevalent and pressing concern, with nearly 6% facing them in the United States. It is imperative for institutions and program organizers to recognize the significance of effectively tracking and managing these allergies. Having a comprehensive system in place for documenting and accessing information about children's allergies is crucial to creating a safe environment. Equally important is ensuring staff members are well-trained and equipped with the knowledge to respond swiftly in case of an allergic reaction.

Medication administration and oversight

The importance of safely tracking medication administration cannot be overstated, as errors in this process can pose significant health risks. Instances of minors receiving the wrong medication—or, in some cases, staff forgetting to administer a medication—highlight the potential dangers associated with inadequate oversight.

Injury prevention in structured and unstructured activities

The risks of injuries—both in structured activities and during innocuous free play—underscore the need for comprehensive training, ensuring proper camper-staff ratios, and incident reporting.

Mental health considerations

Prioritizing the mental health of both youth attending programs on campus as well as staff is paramount to the success of auxiliary programs on campus. The transition to a new environment—away from familiar support systems—can trigger mental health challenges in minors on campus, and it is essential to foster environments that support mental, emotional, and social health. It is fundamental for educational institutions to recognize the significance of staff training in identifying and addressing mental health concerns among participants.

Navigating behavioral challenges and abuse

Safeguarding minors on campus requires a comprehensive approach that addresses issues of bullying, abuse, and neglect. It is critical to acknowledge that youth-on-youth abuse is on the rise and often overlooked, highlighting the pressing need for heightened awareness and proactive measures within these settings. By fostering a culture of openness, reporting, and accountability, institutions can work toward preventing and addressing instances of abuse and neglect, ensuring the well-being and safety of all minors engaged in programs on college and university campuses.

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