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Youth Program Risk Management: A Case Study of the 4-H PetPALS Program

Abstract

Risk management has been an especially important topic in the 4-H youth development program over the past 15 years. Traditional programs face challenges as risks are identified and new programs are under increased scrutiny to ensure that youth and volunteers are in a safe environment. 4-H PetPALS serves as an example of a program designed and implemented with risk management strategies incorporated throughout the process. In this article we describe the risks associated with this type of program and the management strategies that must be considered and implemented in order to ensure that a positive learning environment is achieved.

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Introduction

Community-based organizations face ongoing challenges to provide high-quality programs and services for and with local citizens. The need and demand for human services to maintain and improve quality of life continue to grow, especially in very rural and large urban areas. The Cooperative Extension System is in a unique position to expand its leadership in engaging local citizens to develop and implement educational programs.

Lappe and Dubois (1994) emphasize that more citizens must assume active leadership roles through civic engagement if the quality of community life is to be maintained and improved. Identifying program opportunities that meet the actual and/or emerging needs of communities must be a priority of Extension. At the same time, it is important to critically evaluate, during the program planning and implementation process, the potential risks associated with programs that are designed in cooperation with local community members to ensure well-being of participants, sustainability, and a positive impact on participants.

The 4-H PetPALS (People and Animals Linking Successfully) program (Miller & Suthers-McCabe, 2002) is one example of merging identified community needs (growth of service-learning popularity; increase population of youth having companion animals; and an aging population) with a faculty member's passion, interest, and expertise. It is increasingly important that programs, such as 4-H PetPALS, be critically analyzed to ensure that risks are managed in an appropriate manner. Failure to manage risks can lead to less than desirable program outcomes, diminished community support, and potential harm or injury to participants, volunteers, service recipients, or community members. Four-H youth development faculty and staff have, for years, engaged in professional development opportunities related to risk management; however, there are few case study examples available for use and review, such as for a higher risk program like 4-H PetPALS.

Program Development & Risk Management

The design and implementation of new programs for and with audiences that have traditionally been underserved may present any number of challenges. A common issue that comes up with new programs is that of risk management and how the organization will ensure the safety of service recipients, volunteers, and community members. A specific challenge with the risk management process is to incorporate it into existing program development and planning models and not treat it as a separate, time-consuming, and burdensome process.

The development of the 4-H PetPALS curriculum brought to light the potential risks associated with integrating companion animals and youth into senior healthcare facilities having medical equipment and supplies, under the direction of volunteer leaders. Fortunately, throughout the development process, the curriculum authors considered risk management issues and took the appropriate steps to reduce those risks, but not compromise the quality of the experience for youth, volunteers, companion animals, and seniors.

The development, implementation, and evaluation of the 4-H PetPALS program serves as an example of how risk management strategies can be built into the overall program development process. Bringing animals into healthcare facilities is a common 4-H club community service activity for youth enrolled in pet, small animal, and even farm animal projects. While the 4-H PetPALS program is relatively new, most 4-H youth, volunteers, and professional staff have not realized the potential risks involved nor received the training to be cognizant of those risks.

4-H PetPALS (People and Animals Linking Successfully)

The 4-H PetPALS program is a leader-directed, experientially based, intergenerational program linking young people and their pets with senior adults. This innovative program utilizes the natural bond between youth and animals to promote positive youth development. Master 4-H PetPALS volunteer leaders receive training to teach youth the skills needed to interact with residents in senior healthcare facilities. 4-H members learn animal handling and care, as well as skills needed to communicate with senior adults and foster intergenerational relationships. Youth expand their capacities to develop leadership abilities and civic responsibilities in an animal-assisted activities context. The 4-H PetPALS program allows young people to be models for residents in healthcare facilities and the community at-large related to the significance of human-companion animal interactions and the importance of intergenerational relationships.

Risk Management

Programs that seek to engage new audiences, particularly vulnerable populations (elderly, minors, or individuals with disabilities), must be critically analyzed for potential and actual risks that may harm a service recipient, member, or volunteer. Program planning and development provide the opportunity for Extension professionals to identify and manage potential risks associated with community-based programs. The risk management process suggests that individuals should:

1. Identify and acknowledge potential risks;
2. Evaluate and prioritize potential risks;
3. Implement strategies to mitigate potential risks; and
4. Evaluate, monitor and update processes (Nonprofit Risk Management Center, 1997).

Combining the risk management and more traditionally recognized program development models will help ensure that the implementation of new programs in local communities will offer youth and volunteers an opportunity to engage in sound educational programs that are emotionally and physically safe.

Organizational Assets

Generally speaking, program leaders must address risk issues that relate to the organization's assets:

1. People--board members, volunteers, employees, clients, donors, and the general public;
2. Property--buildings, facilities, equipment, materials, copyrights, and trademarks;
3. Income--sales, grants, investment earnings, and contributions; and

4. Goodwill--reputation, stature in the community, and the ability to raise funds and appeal to prospective donors (Head & Herman, 2002).

It is recognized that not every program or activity coordinated by Extension employees will include potential risks directly related to each organizational asset. The 4-H PetPALS program is one program that certainly has potential risks related to people, property, income, and goodwill. Additionally, it be must recognized that there are potential risks to the animals that are a part of the program.

Following, we describe the potential risks to people, animals, property, and organizational goodwill. We recognize that there are potential income risks associated with this program; however, the other identified risks are more prevalent, thus deserving more detailed discussion.

Risks to People and Management Strategies

The 4-H PetPALS program would generally be considered a higher risk activity, especially for the people and animals involved. The potential risks to youth, volunteers, employees, visitors, and residents of senior care facilities include:

1. Exposing residents and staff to an illness, such as a common cold;
2. Exhibiting inappropriate emotions around residents, visitors, and staff after being through a traumatic experience, such as the death of a grandparent, parent, or child;
3. Exposing residents, visitors, and staff to a contagious disease, such as chicken pox;
4. Becoming ill or bodily fluids suddenly presenting themselves;
5. Transmitting diseases that are transmissible between animals and humans and vice versa (zoonosis);
6. Scratching or biting a resident, eliminating on a resident, or a similar incident by the animal; and
7. Complaining about a youth and/or animal by a staff member or resident.

It is important, when considering the potential harm caused to people involved in the program, that participants and senior care facilities understand steps to take to protect the well-being of everyone involved. Some risk mitigation strategies include:

1. Staying home and not visiting a senior care facility if youth and/or volunteers are ill;
2. Taking time after a traumatic experience (e.g., loss of a loved one) prior to visiting a facility;
3. Recognizing if youth or adults have recently been exposed to or experienced a contagious disease and not visiting the facility;
4. Calling for the help of a staff member and cleaning up according to the facility's infection control protocol;
5. Vaccinating animals for any zoonotic disease and testing animals for specific diseases as required by the facility's protocol or state 4-H program;
6. Ensuring that dogs have passed the American Kennel Club's (AKC) Canine Good Citizen ® (CGC) Test and other animals have passed the Socialized PetPALS Test (SPP); and
7. Requiring a staff person and/or adult present when youth and pets are visiting.

It is also very important to establish a record-keeping system with the facility to document visits, one that ensures confidentiality yet can counter unfounded complaints or incidents.

While there are certainly steps that can be taken to limit the exposure of facility residents, staff,

and volunteers to potential risks, there are those risks that are present that have nothing to do with the health and well-being of 4-H members and volunteers. The 4-H PetPALS participants should know and understand the facility's infection control protocol so that they may adequately respond in case of an emergency; volunteers should work with senior care facility staff to make sure that those residents participating have been screened to limit exposures that could be harmful to them; youth and volunteers should follow strict guidelines in terms of hand washing to limit the spreading of germs, etc.; and orientation to the facility should take place to ensure that everyone understands how to get help if needed.

Risks to Animals and Management Strategies

While many non-profit organizations may not have to address potential risks to animals, it is important to note that the potential risk to animals is as important as that to people in the 4-H PetPALS program. Risks to animals may include:

1. Transmitting zoonotic diseases from humans to the animals;
2. Becoming frightened and responding in an aggressive manner that causes harm to them;
3. Getting loose in a facility and getting into harmful materials;
4. Reacting adversely due to becoming stressed; and
5. Being poked, choked or scared unintentionally by a resident.

Mitigating the risks to animals is equally as important as mitigating the risks to people involved in the program. Strategies to reduce the potential risks include:

1. Establishing a year-round wellness program for pets with a veterinarian that includes required vaccinations and staff indicating if a resident has a potentially zoonotic disease;
2. Socializing and familiarizing the animal to scenarios that parallel what a 4-H PetPALS team might encounter while visiting;
3. Keeping the animal on a leash or contained in such a manner that it does not get loose in the facility;
4. Maintaining a high-quality diet for pets, as well as initiating proper exercise to help reduce stress;
5. Establishing an area where pets can be taken to relax between room-to-room visits; and
6. Getting the animal used to potential reactions by residents, such as clumsy and aggressive petting, angry yelling, poking, and grabbing the animal anywhere on its body.

A common challenge in risk management that is often times overlooked by those individuals responsible for mitigating risk is effective communication strategies. Adults establishing the relationship between 4-H and the senior care facility can greatly reduce potential risks to animals and people by establishing written guidelines for animals and youth that are visiting a facility. Senior healthcare facilities generally have written policies and procedures in place for animal-assisted activities, and these should be identified prior to the first visit and reviewed by all participants.

Risk to Property and Management Strategies

While the Extension program locally or on a statewide level will not own the actual facility that is being visited by 4-H members and volunteers, there still remain risks to other property. In this case, the property that is "owned" by Extension is the curriculum and other copyright materials. At the same time, program leaders must ensure that the property, equipment, and materials owned by the facility being visited are not damaged.

Property to consider includes the healthcare facility's property as well as the property owned (possessed) by the residents. Facilities' property might include furniture, healthcare equipment, magazines and papers, and residents' confidential records. Resident's property could include furniture, family heirlooms, pictures, and knickknacks. A pet could be too large to visit in certain

rooms, where the pet's tail might knock something off a shelf, or the pet could jump up and break something. Pets could jump out of a basket onto a quilt, blanket, and bite or soil the article.

To reduce the risk of an inappropriate animal visiting with youth, dogs must pass the AKC® Canine Good Citizen (CGC) Test, which shows they are well-mannered and obedient, and do not react adversely to strange noises, odors, equipment, or people with atypical mannerisms. Other pets must pass the Socialized PetPALS Test, which tests the same criteria as that in the AKC® Canine Good Citizen Test; however the handler-pet team executes the exercises with the pet in the type of basket or carrier in which it would normally visit.

Pets that pass these tests show they have the aptitude to be in a variety of environments. For the 4-H PetPALS program, when the handler-pet teams do the CGC and SPP tests, some of the exercises require the use of healthcare equipment, such as bed pans, walkers, canes, IV poles, and wheelchairs, to test how the animal reacts to the movement and noise that can possibly be made by that equipment use.

Prior to the first official visit to the senior healthcare facility, youth and volunteers should meet with staff (without bringing their pets) to familiarize themselves with the facility and surroundings. Participants will have an opportunity to become familiar with the layout of the facilities and learn where the equipment is kept, what type of equipment is commonly in the hallway, size of rooms, and the types of decorations in the rooms. When walking an animal down a hallway, youth will know how to react with the pet being around certain equipment to ensure the animal does not get tangled up in a cord, for example, and pull something off a piece of equipment and damage it.

As a result of a pre-visit youth also would know where to take their pets to relieve themselves. Youth must visit with pets, such as rabbits, for example, that cannot be housebroken, in a basket, pet bed, or carrier that will contain any excrement. When taken out of the carrier, pets should be put on a blanket or in a towel so any excrement will not contaminate equipment, furniture, or the resident. Otherwise, pets are left in the basket or pet bed during the visit.

The remaining two organizational assets that are sometimes difficult to relate to risk management in the Cooperative Extension System and thus to identify strategies to reduce potential risk are that of income and goodwill. In this case, income is not the actual money made from a sale of a product or good, rather we view it as the ability to secure grants, contracts, and donors. Perhaps more easily understood is that of goodwill, which directly relates to the reputation in local communities that allows the organization to continue to offer programs that individuals will attend. Following are brief discussions of both income and goodwill in terms of how they relate to Extension programming and more specifically the 4-H PetPALS program.

Risk to Goodwill and Management Strategies

Extension employees and volunteers must be cognizant of Extension's reputation in the community and ensure that it is not negatively affected. Organizational goodwill relates directly to the organization's stature in the community and the ability to raise funds, appeal to prospective volunteers, and partner with other organizations and agencies (Nonprofit Risk Management Center, 1997). It is important to know that the goodwill of an organization can be damaged by paid staff, volunteers, 4-H members, or partners.

Within the 4-H youth development program, Extension educators are faced with volunteers who desire to challenge the process. While challenging the process is positive, doing so in a manner that demonstrates disregard for organizational policy and procedures can be very destructive. At the same time, there are likely to be volunteers in the organization who are not effective communicators and wish to withhold information in an attempt to control the environment and be seen as the leader. Both of these destructive type of behaviors can damage an organization's goodwill, as those in the community (often times donors, potential volunteers, and potential partners) see and hear the negative behavior and may decide to take their time and/or resources to another program.

During a conflict situation, parties involved will limit or cut off communication as a result of being upset with another individual or group. While this may reduce the stress of one person or group, it will undoubtedly cause problems with others! Generally, conflict arises when one person or group has information (or different information) that another person or group does not, or when individuals simply see things differently (Bennis, 1989). During these times, it is important for the Extension professional to be an effective facilitator to minimize the communication challenges that often times come up during the implementation of new programs or when working with new partners.

Conclusion

For many years, youth and volunteers have planned visits to senior healthcare facilities across the country where youth bring their small animals for residents to interact. There are certainly benefits to these types of service projects; however, the potential risks are far greater than traditionally recognized by program leaders.

The 4-H PetPALS program provides a formal structure, including the management strategies

necessary to mitigate the risks associated with integrating companion animals into an environment that includes members of a vulnerable population (elderly, minors, individuals with disabilities), medical equipment and supplies, and new facilities never seen by the pet and 4-H member. Implementing risk management strategies that address the critical assets of the organization will help ensure that a positive environment is present that minimizes potential harm to youth, pets, volunteers, employees, and residents.

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