Event Planning

Protect Your Events by Finding and Fixing Gaps to Strengthen Risk Management Year-Round

by Domenic Antinucci

THE LEGEND OF SLEEPY HOLLOW, Washington Irving's classic horror tale, may be fiction, but it comes to life every autumn at Sleepy Hollow Cemetery. Patrons can take nighttime lantern tours across the very grounds where the fabled Headless Horseman once threw a head—or was it a pumpkin?—at a nervous schoolmaster named Ichabod Crane.

While Sleepy Hollow, N.Y., which changed its name from North Tarrytown in 1996, is steeped in literary tradition; it's not the only place where local cemeteries host fall events. Harvest festivals, ghost walks, interactive murder mysteries, theatrical performances, art shows, and living history portrayals bring throngs of visitors to cemeteries nationwide each Halloween, which is now the second biggest commercial holiday.

Fall and winter events result in increased foot traffic and revenue. They can also create unexpected liability exposures, especially if visitors wander into less-traveled areas of the grounds. For these reasons, themed events create valuable real-world scenarios that cemetery owners can use to pressure-test their risk management strategies.

See the Risks Clearly

Visitors attending events, and the vendors staffing them, may not be familiar with the cemetery grounds or its rules and procedures, raising the possibility of accidents. Each incident could present legal, health, and reputational risks. Among the biggest exposures:

- **Slips, trips, and falls:** These incidents are the most common source of claims, and when they happen during an event, cemeteries can be liable even if the guest trips over their own two feet. Inadequate lighting on a dark evening can cause patrons to misjudge their step, trip on a headstone, or stumble over debris.

Leaves, snow, and ice can cause visitors to lose their footing and slip off a walkway. Increased traffic inside permanent and temporary restrooms create more opportunities for spills on the floor. Cords from decorations, lights, and audiovisual equipment can also add to the trip hazards.

- **Scheduling conflicts:** While hosting fall events is a great way to attract guests, cemetery owners should always keep the primary operation top of mind. Management should ensure events do not overlap with funeral services, as a lack of focus or resources to fulfill the service could lead to costly mishaps. Management must clearly communicate when and where services and events are scheduled and plan accordingly.
- **Theft and vandalism:** Not every visitor will arrive with good intentions. Halloween Night tends to invite mischief and can bring out the worst in people, with cemeteries often the target for acts of vandalism—from painting graffiti to knocking over headstones and interfering with grave setups. It takes just one person to wander into an unmonitored part of the grounds to cause mayhem, and cemeteries are on the hook for cleanup and repair costs. They could even face litigation.

Prepare for Safe, Fun Events

With a clear-eyed view of the potential risks, cemetery owners can plan for the unexpected and prepare their grounds, and their employees, to host fun, safe, respectful events. Consider these steps ahead of all events.

- **Build an event framework**. Determine how much space is needed for the event and estimate the expected number of attendees. Map out the grounds and decide which areas will be open to patrons, and which will be off limits. Think through any accommodation that might be needed for different age groups. Assess lighting needs for nighttime events. Develop an emergency plan by training onsite staff in CPR and first aid, coordinating with local EMS crews or healthcare providers to provide onsite medical care, or both.
- **Staff appropriately.** Schedule veteran staff for high-traffic events, where larger crowds and more complex situations demand experience. Pair experienced employees with newer staff for on-the-job training.
- **Keep the grounds well-maintained.** Look for and repair hazards such as cracked sidewalks, shaky handrails, dead trees, branches, and divots. Remove leaves, weeds, and debris from footpaths. Add extra shifts for lawn mowing or trash pickup if needed.
- **Prepare the space.** Ensure markers and gravestones are visible. Tape down all exposed wires or cover them with mats. Use non-slip grounding on any creek footbridges. Make all signage visible and designate public areas from employee-only zones.
- **Do a pre-event walkthrough.** Create a checklist and examine every inch of the grounds to spot and address any unforeseen risks. Check to see whether signage is clear and lighting is sufficient. Look for any equipment, branches, or other materials that could represent a trip hazard.
- **Monitor key areas during the event.** Service and clean bathrooms and portable restrooms regularly. Assign someone to monitor graves, fences, fountains, or any other sensitive property features so guests don't disturb them. Develop a protocol

for staff to follow as soon as they see any defects on the grounds or any problems develop with crowd control.

- **Perform a thorough post-event review.** Look at visitor behavior and note any issues with signage, lighting, crowd management, or emergency planning. Document any incidents or near-misses. Then develop plans to fix the trouble spots well before event season starts again next autumn.

Insure Fall Revelry

Prior to planning any event, cemetery owners should consider meeting with their insurers well in advance to verify that their policies are up to date and will provide the expected coverage. Let insurers know about any upgrades or new structures on the grounds.

Insurers can also serve as trusted advisors to cemetery operators. They can draft contracts that transfer risk from third-party vendors and away from the cemetery. Insurers can also offer risk mitigation tips and share best practices, such as requiring all vendors to carry their own certificate of insurance. If anything goes wrong during the event, notify an insurer immediately so they can start work to protect the business.

Don't Lose Your Head

We may never know whether the Headless Horseman was really Ichabod Crane's rival Brom Bones, but cemetery owners can know the risks of themed events well in advance. By mitigating risks and working with insurers, operators and staff can pull off a safe, fun fall or winter event and use the lessons learned to strengthen their risk management strategies year-round. ☑

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