



Haunted Houses

Are You Really Prepared For a Scary Experience?



Each fall, many members hold seasonal Halloween special events that include hayrides, haunted walks, and “Haunted Houses.” Many are also approached by outside charitable organizations requesting the use of member facilities such as recreation centers, schools, unoccupied houses, seasonal aquatic pool buildings and related structures in which to conduct a Haunted House. These places are decorated to be “scary,” often involving the rearrangement of the normal flow of the building, the reduction or elimination of lighting, and the introduction of decorative material. Confusion of the senses and alteration of the exit area can heighten the “scary” experience; consequently, normal exits are either not apparent or available, and spaces can be confining.



Over the years, tragic fires have occurred in both permanent and temporary Haunted Houses. The predominate cause of these fires was a source of ignition—electrical, open flame, butane lighter— coming in contact with highly combustible material such as papered walls, hay bales or flammable decorations. The National Fire Protection Association’s Life Safety Code (NFPA 101), which is adopted by the State of New Hampshire’s State Fire Code and enforced in all jurisdictions, provides detailed guidance on Special Amusement Buildings including Haunted Houses. Essentially, depending on the arrangement of the Haunted House and the facility in which it is located, adherence to code requirements and recommended practices is advised. Any structures used for a Haunted House or similar event should include the following:

- Automatic sprinkler protection;
- Automatic smoke detection;
- Emergency lighting;
- Exits: distances to reach them; exit marking

- and illumination of corridors, etc.;
- Interior Finish: flame resistant paints and wall coverings; no dried vegetation; fire retardant tents or other materials;
- Fire Extinguishers: placement; staff familiarity with proper usage;
- Occupancy: limited group size; guides with flashlights and approved means of communication; familiarity with emergency procedures;
- Emergency Evacuation Plan (written and posted): all personnel familiar, rehearsed prior to event; and
- Prohibition of open flame, pyrotechnics, smoking or non-approved supplemental heating devices.

Primex³ advises all members seeking to host a Haunted House to inform the fire department having authority in that jurisdiction. The enforcement of life safety and building codes may fall to the building inspector, fire department, other local government entity, or to the State Fire Marshal. You can request that an inspection be made of your facility to assess fire and life safety and code compliance.

From both a safety and liability perspective, consideration must be given to staffing the event. Personnel trained in the use of fire extinguishers and emergency procedures are crucial in maintaining a safe environment. In addition, Primex³ urges that all participants be accompanied through the Haunted House by at least two adults. Frequently, police officers are used in this capacity. The use of two adults can reduce the risk of charges of improper touching or other inappropriate behaviors by anyone and can assist in the event of an emergency.

Managing risk in a proactive manner can assure a safe event.

Should you require additional information, please contact Primex³ Risk Management Services at 1-800-698-2364 or email riskmanagement@nhprimex.org

