Mental Preparation

A guide to planning ahead for whatever comes next

By Jonathan Caflun
Photos: Camp Wekeela

If the past two summers have taught us anything, it's the need for flexible and attentive plans. The COVID-19 pandemic has opened our eyes to many different societal and existential failures across the country and the world, but it also has allowed for a stronger emphasis on health and safety protocols that many businesses, schools, and camps may not have focused on previously. Camp Wekeela in Maine opened in 2020 and faced its own set of challenges as there were so many unknowns about the virus at the time. But I believe 2021 was far more challenging than 2020 for most summer camps. Of course, there was the joy we all feel when summer at camp begins; and this was even more apparent for the majority of camps that closed their doors in

Most of the challenges, which were exacerbated by the pandemic, were out of the camps' control, for example, a national staffing shortage, arguably due to disinterest for in-person work, while virtual work was the mainstay of most businesses. Due to these shortages, camps were forced to fill important staff positions with young and inexperienced individuals, which led to many unexpected issues for directors. During the summer, directors are only as good as their team, and when the team needs hand-holding, it is

issues were natural, like extreme heat across the country or excessive rain; for example, in the state of Maine, we saw the wettest July on record. The political polarization of mask-wearing and vaccines among many people left many camps making decisions on the safety of their community without the full support of the government, staff members, and families. Finally, campers and staff experienced mental and emotional challenges due to being reintroduced into society and coexisting with others after far too much time in isolation.

There is no way of knowing where we will be in June 2022; the pandemic may be long gone as vaccines will be readily available, and many Americans may have received booster shots. There is the awful possibility that new and dangerous variants of the virus will emerge. It is unclear what to expect, but we do know we must be ready for any scenarios. The following will hopefully serve as a guide to help prepare for summer 2022.

Hire Staff Members And Offer Incentives

foreign embassies, I was very hesitant to hire international staff. As a result, the 2021 camp staff consisted mostly of Americans, which came at a price for the number of children who attended. A few summers ago, we hired staff members as early as one week after the previous summer ended. We were "fully staffed" last January—a great metric to hit super-early—but as the world started to get back on its feet and staff members were enticed by internships or got cold feet, potential staff began to drop out in late spring. To prepare for summer 2022, it is imperative that camps start early in the hiring process. This may be an uncomfortable change for some camps, but working on the process for a few days, weeks, or months early can lead to peace of mind and with more of a selection of good applicants.

Here is the best way to start for each group:

- **For international staff:** Contact your preferred international staffing agencies. They have a huge database of staff members who have yet to come to the U.S. for the exchange programs or J1 visas. The Biden White House announced in September that vaccinated travelers will be granted access to the borders beginning in November. The main concern will be the embassies, which

- **For American staff:** Once American teenagers and young adults begin to enter college, they usually receive an enormous amount of pressure from their parents for internships or paying jobs, so they often move on from summer-camp jobs. It is imperative that future workplaces understand that working as a camp counselor is one of the most rewarding and demanding jobs a college-age student can have. Wekeela begins the hiring process in August, but whenever the process is begun, consider two successful strategies for American staff in particular: referrals and “early sign-on” bonuses. Depending on a camp’s budget, this can be an inexpensive way to attract more returning staff early on and to see if they can bring a friend or two. We offer a $200 referral fee to any staff member who brings a friend who stays the whole summer successfully. The bonus fee is included in the last check. A sign-on bonus of $100 can be a nice addition as well. Most overnight staff members are not working hourly, so this bonus may be a good way to

within their major, so offering an internship program (with pay) is a great way for them to balance this pressure. It is usually as simple as writing up some paperwork for the school and overseeing a summer-time project.

Work On Contingency Plans For Food

on my to-do list for the summer, but it happened. The supply-chain issues in food service, due to a lack of truck drivers and supplies, was not ideal. Although these issues improved by the end of the summer, we had to constantly reshuffle the menu and inventories, which led to more stress on camp kitchens, campers, staff members, and of course, the kitchen staff. Some camps may have had to sacrifice favorite meals or cut back on produce due to high prices. Looking toward 2022, it is smart to work with local vendors and big companies to provide fresh foods and supplies. In 2021, we decided to stop ordering fruits and vegetables from our big supplier, as they were coming in late, damaged, or already spoiled. Instead, we partnered with a local mom-and-pop farm to supply all of the fruits and vegetables. This resulted in healthier, better food service, and we helped a small, local business as well. Look for these types of businesses for meat, fruits and vegetables, paper goods, etc.

Develop Staff Training

Due to CDC guidelines, camps had to adopt a 14-day quarantine in 2020, which increased staff training to two

summer. It's also evident that camps should focus staff training on more than set-up and emergency procedures. Also, giving staff a break due to fatigue and exhaustion is necessary to create a healthy camp environment. No matter what staff members look like in 2022, camps should give their employees the tools to succeed, like sessions on homesickness, bullying, setting up a bunk, etc., but also tools for their mental health. Ethical decision-making and opportunities to have fun with their peers should be an important part of staff training. There is nothing more powerful than personal connections in a time of loneliness and isolation—staff members must have every tool at their disposal. In the weeks leading up to staff training, contact employees and ask which topics they would like to cover. Have Zoom staff meet-and-greets prior to arrival (these were a big hit at Wekeela)!

Contact Parents Of Campers Who Struggled And Formulate A Plan

In 2021, students struggled to transition from virtual schooling to large social settings. These children had not been in school consistently for a year and were thrust back into camp communities where they had to live in cabins with their peers and learn to have real conversations

last two summers. Camp should be a place where every child thrives, makes memories, and has fun, so working together as partners will be advantageous.

Preparing for summer 2022 may take many different paths while moving forward with plans. Using these tools for staffing, campers, training, and supply chain hiccups (which seem to be continuing) will hopefully lead to a less stressful and successful camp season!

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