

Handling hazing incidents: a brief guide for school staff members

This section will help you respond appropriately to a hazing incident. Reading through this section help you assess how prepared you are. This section is written for coaches and other school activity staff members, with special notes for administrators.

- Before a hazing incident occurs
- Investigating hazing reports
- Reporting hazing
- Responding to victims, perpetrators, and parents (of both)
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- Handling media

Before a hazing incident occurs

Become thoroughly familiar with your school's policies on hazing. If you're an administrator, check out your state high school association's policy.

Look for language in the policy that prohibits hazing both on and off school property and during or after regular school hours.

Talk to your students about what constitutes hazing, the consequences of hazing, and your unwillingness to tolerate any form of hazing on your team or group. Make sure all students and parents are familiar with the hazing policy, and know what behaviors are appropriate and inappropriate. Take many opportunities to prevent hazing by promoting respect, teamwork, and fair play.

Include the hazing policy in the athletic/activity code of conduct. Have all parents and students sign this code before the student is allowed to participate in athletic and/or activities.

Use pre-season meetings with students and parents as an opportunity to review your school's philosophy about hazing and the rules and consequences for hazing.

Make sure students and parents know that whether or not a person voluntarily participates in a hazing activity does not matter.

Keep a log of all activities you have done to prevent hazing. Your own reputation and that of your school's may depend on your ability to demonstrate that you have done what you can to prevent hazing. You cannot always control the actions of your students, but you must be able to demonstrate that you have done what you can to protect the safety of all students.

Investigating hazing reports

Always take a report about or a rumor of hazing seriously. The range of responses may vary, but in general, each rumor is an opportunity to talk to your team about respect, to investigate the possibility that hazing is happening, and to talk to your colleagues.

Once you have information that hazing may have occurred, begin an investigation. Document all the actions you take, including facts about what happened, your observations, dates and times. Avoid generalizations.

Reporting hazing

Know your immediate responsibilities for reporting a hazing incident. In general, most policies will state that as soon as you receive a report of hazing or observe hazing yourself, you must report the incident to an administrator immediately. (See **Sample Policy**.)

Know the procedures for responding to a medical emergency. Some incidents of hazing require immediate medical attention, if they result in physical harm.

Administrators, coaches, other school activity staff (including officials) may have different responsibilities for reporting and follow-up. Make sure everyone knows their specific roles so that communication is clear and confidentiality is protected.

Responding to victims, perpetrators and parents (of both)

Take steps to protect the person who brought the information to you. If hazing exists, then there is serious potential for harm to anyone who blows the whistle on hazing. Know the limits on confidentiality, but never promise complete confidentiality to a student. There are circumstances involving harm when confidentiality cannot be kept.

If your investigation convinces you that an incident has taken place, meet with the involved students individually and document their version of events. Notify the parents and guardians of both the victim(s) and the perpetrator(s) that you will be meeting with their child(ren).

Take disciplinary action in accordance with your school policy. Make sure you follow all the steps of due process.

Providing follow-up to victims, perpetrators, and bystanders

Make a referral to your school's student assistance program or to counseling services for all students involved in the hazing incident. Each student's situation must be taken into consideration individually. What motivates hazing is complicated. There may be underlying causes for hazing that are not your responsibility to identify. However, a Student Assistance Team or counseling professional may be able to respond appropriately with counseling or other support services. They will also be able to provide support for any students who have been hazed, as well as those doing the hazing and the bystanders.

Handling media

Decide how much information about an incident you will disclose publicly. Some incidents can be kept completely private. Some will require meetings with the team members and/or parents. More public incidents may require contact with the media. Your decisions about this will depend on the seriousness of the incident, the number of students involved, and the amount of information that has already spread.

Write down a list of key messages (sometimes called "talking points") that you want to convey to the public about hazing. Keep these messages direct and to the point. This will keep you focused during interviews with the media. Don't be afraid to repeat these points.

Put one person in charge of talking with the media, preferably the district's public information officer. Make sure that person knows what to say and is available to the media.

Provide a straightforward message for the media to report. Saying nothing may be good legal advice, but it sometimes has a negative impact. Do not say "no comment." This makes it look as though you are hiding something and leads to speculation by the media and the public. If you are not prepared to issue a statement, inform the media that complete information is not available. Promise to contact them as soon as it is available, and then do so! Assure the media that you are working with them and that they will get the most accurate information as quickly as possible.

Don't panic, don't assume anything (especially that a conversation is "off the record"), don't try to cover-up or quash a story or write protest letters to the editor.

Even if the facts are unknown, your spokesperson could say something like: "This allegation is disturbing, and we're **very** concerned about it. We're not sure exactly what has happened, and we are investigating further." Consider using this time as a "teachable moment" - convey to the audience what the school's policy is regarding hazing.

The average TV sound bite is less than 10 seconds, so if a person's message takes 20 seconds or more, it's unlikely to be shown in full. Ask yourself, "How can I say this clearly within 10 seconds?"

Make sure you get your message out by making it as clear as possible and by repeating your points. If you don't like the way you said it the first time, don't be afraid to repeat your main point over and over again as part of your answers to other questions.