**Ethics Awareness Month**

**Scenario 3**

**Special Event Safety Protocols**

**Scenario**

My organization chose to move forward with an in-person fundraising event in December 2020 despite our state's continuously rising COVID-19 numbers and a statewide ban on gatherings larger than 10 people. Our executive director instructed me to advertise the event as "following all federal, state, and local COVID-19 safety procedures."

However, when pressed about COVID protections in internal meetings, she stated that the only planned precautions are having attendees sign a waiver upon arrival, displaying a sign asking people not to enter if they are ill (posted inside the larger venue, but before the entrance into the room where dinner will be served) and providing hand sanitizer. She said several times that the venue is willing to make whatever accommodations we would like (meaning, in my opinion, that they will not hold us to or enforce any safety guidelines).

We did not plan to seat individuals any farther apart than usual (full 8 and 10 rounds). When I asked additional questions about the COVID safety protocols, I was told I personally was not required to be at the event. I was grateful to not be expected to attend, although I worried that not attending would negatively affect my standing at the organization. Our executive director planned to bring in staff and guests from out of state. When I asked if we had any legal liability if guests contacted COVID at the event, I was advised that they would never be able to prove it was contracted at our event.

I think it is wrong to put our donors and staff at risk in this way and will be terrible for the organization if our event becomes the next super spreader. Am I overreacting?

**Questions**

What is the fundraiser’s responsibility in this situation? What ethical standards does this scenario involve?

If leadership is clearly not interested in addressing these issues, how does a fundraisers continue to bring them up? What are other avenues besides speaking with the executive director?

What kinds of organizational policies or procedures might assist a fundraiser in this situation?

**Outcome**

The event was delayed a couple of times until 2021 but finally took place with no masking, distancing, hand sanitizer stations, or signs/directions for people to mask if unvaccinated or not to enter if ill. This was mostly in line with our state’s requirements, though the state did require unvaccinated individuals to wear masks

Personally, this dilemma played a role in my decision to leave the organization.

**Commentary**

Thanks to the person who came forward with this scenario, which likely is on the minds of many events fundraisers at this time.

It is clear that the organization did not intend to follow all guidelines regarding COVID related safety, despite its claim that it will do so. This is a violation of sections 7 and 12 of the AFP *Code of Ethical Standards*. To the extent that the communication is misleading, it may also expose the organization to legal liability under one or more truth-in-communications statutes.

While I acknowledge the difficulty of someone proving they got sick at a particular event, it is not impossible to do so in my experience. If the organization does not take all reasonable precautions to minimize the likelihood of someone getting ill at their event, it could also be exposed to civil and reputational liability here.

Ironically, I see this situation as an opportunity for the organization to tailor its communications in a way that improves its standing in its community. Why not include descriptions of exactly what the organization is going to do to protect attendees? Many organizations and businesses are encouraging those who at risk of illness to themselves or infecting others to attend virtually.

I am a proponent of full and frank disclosure whenever possible, and I almost always advise those organizations I work with to follow this maxim in practice. At the same time, I realize my view is not always the prevailing one in the fundraising space. I nevertheless maintain my position because the long-term success of an organization depends more than anything else on its reputation for being an honest, forthright and accountable institution.