



Guidance for Small Endurance Events from an Industry Expert

by **Lonnie Somers**, Chief HAL Officer and Owner, HAL Sports and Running USA board member

(March, 2020) - It goes without saying that this certainly is an unprecedented time for our organizations, events, towns, states, and countries. We know all too well the uncertainty the pandemic is causing for not only our events, but our charities and the reliance of those funds they provide for our charity programs and communities.

These last couple of weeks have been trying, uncertain, and tiring for all of us. We were faced with postponing a major event that was to take place on the weekend of March 15. It was not an easy decision as more factors go into the decision, so much more than the direct threat of COVID-19.

We are here to help our events, and the greater Running USA community, navigate this difficult situation whether your event is within the next 6 weeks, or further on out. One certainty is that everyone will be affected. We have been in several emergency meetings nationally and locally on how to best respond to the pandemic from an event perspective and we are providing you with the information below to assist you as we all face difficult decisions.

There is a lot of information to cover, and the information is fluid as your situation may not be exact based on what all our local, state, and federal agencies actions are dictating. We have provided links to helpful resources where applicable.

Events scheduled for June 1st or later

While no guarantee, generally as projections show right now that if your event is June 1st or later, you are at less risk of having to consider postponement or cancellation. It is most likely registration is going to be slower than normal for your events, and likely that your events may not be as well attended as they have been in prior years.

While it has yet to be officially confirmed, we no doubt are in a recession and our sport/industry and the charities it supports is suffering. This means less disposable income and fewer people registering for events. While I hope it is minimal, we need to be prepared as best we possibly can.

In the interim is important to keep reminding your donors, participants and supporters that you are a charity/community event or supporting one (or the community) and that you need their support by registering, and/or donating. Keep reminding them over and over the importance your event has on bringing in funds for programs and the community support it fosters.

I also recommend adding a Virtual Run/Walk program for those that might not be able to make it or might be still nervous about COVID-19. Give them an option to still be part of the event and support you.

As for communication, you will no doubt get questions, be transparent and be honest. Let them know you are working with experts, following CDC and government recommendations/mandates and will keep them informed of any changes. Communicate support, solidarity, and kindness.

We have been asked by some events in June and later if they should be looking already for backup dates, venues, etc. For the next couple of weeks, we would recommend not to do so.

We are always for being proactive, but realize that all municipalities, special events offices, etc. are inundated with the national and state of emergency needs and working on accommodating those events that are postponed to new dates.

Just as we ask participants to have patience, we need to also give our proper permitting agencies the time they need. This is all new territory for all of us.

Realize that due to the postponement of many events locally and nationally, those events later in the summer and fall are going to be joined by events that traditionally happened during the spring. It is likely that we will all see a dip in participation and registration, we certainly hope not, but now there will be rescheduled events that will likely occur during your event time frame.

We don't yet know what the financial drain and impact will be on individuals, as disposable income may be an issue for most people and they may be not participating in as many events as they might have under normal circumstances.

Events that are taking place from now until end of May

If your event is taking place in the next few weeks you are being faced with the real possibility of canceling or postponing your event. This is a very difficult decision and sometimes due to government mandate. You have already likely incurred or will incur a vast majority of expenses for the event, even they are ultimately canceled or postponed.

Here are the various scenarios you may be facing or will face:

- **Event takes place.** Best case scenario is your event will still be taking place. Messaging and public perception are all-important. You will not make everyone happy even with the event taking place, but these are the things you should do.
- **Set up a virtual category and allow participants to be select or transfer into this program.** This way if they can't make it, don't want to participate, or whatever reason, they can still be part of the event and support it. What we did with one of ours is to allow anyone up to just before the event started to transfer to it. They could have their swag/bib ready for them to pick up at partner location (specialty shoe store for us), or have it mailed for a fee. Several participants appreciated this (more on virtual programs below).
- **Take all necessary precautions:** Have hand sanitizer out at the event. Likely keep people from being in tight gathering areas. For us, in the

coordination of event day logistics, that means more space and spacing out of participants in the corrals. If you have a festival after the race, make sure crowds are dispersed so people are not shoulder to shoulder for a long period of time. Our medical advisors indicate that for a run/walk the most likely contamination point is post-event during festival activities (live music, food gathering areas, beer gardens, etc.). Of course, if we are over the pandemic by your event time, yay! This isn't all necessary, but if the pandemic is still in concern, you will want to take these precautions.

- **Have no unpackaged food or beverages** being given out (except water stations on the course are fine to use cups and water to fill them from jugs, etc.).
- **Have anyone handling beverages and unpackaged food wear protective gloves.**
- **Advise anyone associated with the event that if they are sick or are in the high-risk group they should stay home.** Copy and refer people to the CDC guidelines: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/downloads/workplace-school-and-home-guidance.pdf>.
- **Don't let negative comments affect you.** It is easy to do and easy to start an email or social media battle with people who are difficult. Don't allow it and take a deep breath. They are one person among hundreds more that are supportive and appreciative of you.
- **Communication is important.** Let your participants, sponsors, etc. know safety is #1 priority and that you are taking all measures for a safe event. Remind them that you are (and do this) consulting with the experts and taking direction from government entities on what is best to do. Many participants don't understand the work that goes into producing an event, the true difficulty in canceling or postponing means and that it isn't so easy to do so. You cannot remind them enough to keep patient and be kind. I have examples below of communications that you can borrow from that do a good job of addressing the public.

- **Be sure to connect with your volunteers, sponsors, vendors, police, medical support and be sure they are still able to participate in your event.** If they are not, then you may have no choice but to postpone or cancel. Your first calls should be to your sponsors, vendors (including police, medical, fire as applicable).

Canceled/Postponed Events

This is sadly going to be a reality for events happening over the next several weeks. Since you have already incurred a great deal of expense, being able to refund participants and vendors could cause irreparable harm to your event, business, charity, etc.

- **Do everything you can to postpone vs cancel your event.** That isn't always easy to do, but that should be the goal. Messaging can be tough, but I am sharing some common language communications that you can and should borrow from. See below.
- **If you have to cancel:**
 - If you can offer refunds, great but that is not likely for most events.*
 - Offer a virtual run option (see more about virtual run programs below) that everyone can be transferred to, still earn their swag, and still feel a part of the event.
 - Offer deferments to your event but make it good for over a 2 to 3 year period rather than just for next year.** This does a couple of things, it allows the participant to use within a time frame that they can still participate at some point, and you likely won't be hit with having this deferment cost hit you all in one year. We truly see that in deferments, some want them, but don't end up using them. If they don't use them, then they are just like they were no shows.
 - Allow participants to donate their registration fee** and if you are a charity, it becomes may be a charity deductible donation on their taxes.
 - Be aware that if you are not able to do refunds, you will be going still have some difficult people to deal with.** They will need to be handled on a case by case scenario. You may, in fact, have to refund a small handful of people.

For example, a major marathon on the West Coast had to cancel an event due to a major natural disaster situation. They had a similar policy to allow people to do the event virtually, defer, or donate. They allowed no refunds. They had many thousands signed up for the event. In the end, they had to refund around a dozen very demanding participants. Just hold to your policy of no refunds and don't be afraid to explain to anyone that you are accommodating as best as you can without causing irreparable harm to the event. Keep exceptions to the rule on a case by case basis and limited as best as you can. Communication examples below.

If you have to postpone your event

Messaging of this decision is very important and be sure to indicate this is a postponement, not a cancellation. Some assume postponement is the same as a cancellation.

I have examples below for communication purposes. Indicate that you will need some time in working with inundated agencies (due to the pandemic) in finding a new date and keep them updated as you learn more.

Even if you have nothing to report, let them know you are being patient while the proper agencies are working hard to respond to you as quickly as possible.

You really have three options for what to do with a reschedule of the event to consider

- New date, same venue (most desirable)
- New date, different venue (may need to do this based on the availability of your original venue)
- New date, combine with another event (least desirable option, but could be an option to combine forces with another event and do a dual event)

Try to find out when you can work with the various agencies to find a new date. Most will work with you to transfer permits to different dates, etc. based on the pandemic so your additional costs can be minimized.

Ensure your sponsors, key vendors, etc. can still support your new date. *This is highly important as the key vendors, etc. work with many events and they might already be contracted by them. It would be a terrible situation to postpone your*

event only to have to end up canceling it due to lack of availability of key vendors (timers, event management companies, barricade companies, police, fire, medical, etc.)

With a new date, do keep registration open and you will get in more registrants, which is good, but be aware that typically for most events that postpone, less people will show up in total (meaning high attrition rates overall). Say you have 1000 people registered prior to needing to postpone, then with your new date and registration back open, you get an additional 500. Most attrition is around 15%, but you can expect attrition as high as 35% to 50%.

Have a program in place for those that cannot participate in the new date. A virtual program is a great way to allow those who cannot be there in person to still participate. Or even put in a deferral program to the next year's event.

Resources and Sample Communications

Postponements/cancellations

<https://du-motion.com/news/odgadaju-se-utrke-du-motiona-2020>

<https://www.baa.org/124th-boston-marathon-postponed-september-14>

<https://myemail.constantcontact.com/URGENT--Runnin-of-the-Green-Postponed.html?soid=1124316526737&aid=EKVE9gcvZho>

<https://www.facebook.com/runninofthegreen/photos/a.266729756743806/2769987599751330/?type=3&theater>

<https://runsignup.com/Race/CA/Avalon/Catalinaislandmarathon?rsus=500-400-0fd3ca7f-d913-4096-b88c-e0cc86963880>

<https://newbedfordhalfmarathon.com/>

Event is continuing/addressing covid-19 concerns communication

<https://myemail.constantcontact.com/--Great-news--Runnin-of-the-Green-is-a-go-for-this-Sunday.html?soid=1124316526737&aid=GI0m65RqO-k>

<https://www.facebook.com/runninofthegreen/photos/a.266729756743806/2768648373218586/?type=3&theater>

<https://www.facebook.com/runninofthegreen/photos/pcb.2765979196818837/2765974503485973/?type=3&theater>

Virtual Event Recommendations

A virtual event allows participants to still participate in the event and still feel a part of it at their leisure. Allow them to transfer to this option if they wish. We generally allow them to transfer up to event start time, but not after.

- Decide how they can get their swag that is at least cost to you. We generally have two to three ways for them to receive such items.
- At your offices for a certain period (set a time frame they need to pick this up in, for example, two weeks only).
- At a partner location (specialty store or sponsors place of business) that you drop off packets ready to go and all they have to do is hand them out when someone comes in. Helps for activation for sponsors (also set a time frame).
- Allow them to have it mailed to them for a fee (so you at least cover your time and shipping fees). We have seen from \$7, \$10, and even \$20.
- Encourage them to take a picture and post on social with your hashtags that they did it.
- Use companies like our partners at [Motigo](#) who can help with extending the race experience to those virtually via their smartphones and also their photo walls. Dan, the founder, is working on programs to help many of us with this in this situation to help extend the event experience out to those that cannot make it.

The goal is to keep you from losing revenues that are vital to your mission and allow for sponsorship ROI too as you likely don't want to have to refund those monies either. You can reach Dan at dan@getmotigo.com.

- Here's how Runnin' of the Green, one of our local events, did [their virtual run](#).
- Another good resource (not applicable to registration, but the information is helpful):

<https://runsignup.com/Race/CoronaVirus/Page-12>

Additional helpful communications

Right now, whether we agree or not with the reactions to the pandemic, it is here and we cannot change that. What we can do is continue to work in solidarity and towards the best messaging.

- <https://humanpotentialrunning.com/from-the-rd/pandemics-mass-gatherings-and-the-challenges-of-rds/?fbclid=IwAR1fC1RxaAG1Abt7DM0Te4wo3UL6Q0Qr0qfjnyrD4dlcJXVqmAo6ZCyMN38>
- <https://www.facebook.com/lonnie.somers/posts/10220233001432697>
- <https://runningusa.org/RUSA/News/2020/Running-Industry-Response-to-COVID-19.aspx>

Wishing you the best as we continue to navigate these uncharted waters together.

Lonnie Somers and the HAL Sports team

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